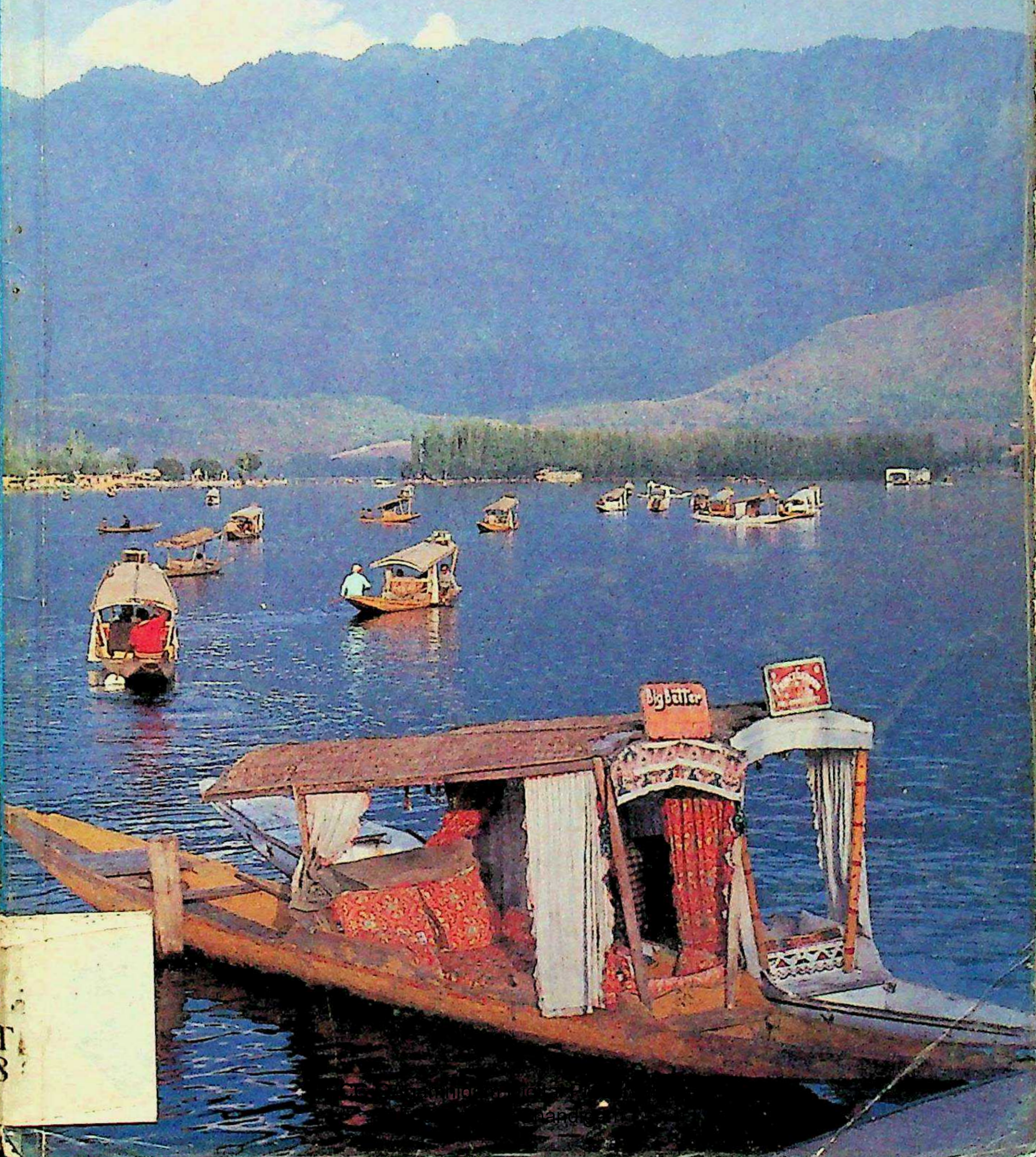
THE STRANGER BESIDE ME

SHORT STORIES FROM KASHMIR



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G.M.C.E.J
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by
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Contents

Introduction 1

Hari Krishan Koul
The Mourners 13

A G Athar
The Enemy 27

Hari Krishan Koul
Tomorrow 33

Hirday Koul Bharati
The Stranger Beside Me 55

Bansi 'Nirdosh'
To Slavery Born 63

Nayeema Ahmad
I am Still Alive 71

Rattan Lal Shant
A New Triangle 77

Ghulam Rasool 'Santosh'
The Voice 91

Nazir Jehangir
The Boy is Guilty 101

Akhtar Mohi-ud-din
The Second Meeting 107

Amin Kamil
The Grave Robber 113

Ali Mohammad Lone
The Void 121

Amin Kamil
The Cattle Pound 127

Anees Hamadani
The Burnt-out Sun 133

Avtar Krishna 'Rehbar'
Anguish 139

Notes on the Authors 147

Glossary 151

Introduction

The desire to translate from Kashmiri into English was born to pay off a debt to two languages: to a mother tongue which remained unused except for commonplace communication, and to a foreign language in which I learnt to think and express myself. But what finally turned the desire into action was the present anguish of the Kashmiris. While sharing in the common sorrow at the spectacle of suffering, loss, death and decay—the classic ingredients of Tragedy—and finding an ethos disintegrating, a people scattered like birds in fright; in fact a whole culture on the brink of collapse, everything Kashmiri, no matter how insignificant, became dearer, more precious, even more worth seeking out and preserving. Thus began my journey through the world of literature in Kashmiri, one of the oldest living languages in India. While getting acquainted with ones own heritage, so many voices were heard. Voices that cried out in protest, or in calm assurance, celebrated the ordinary—hitherto taken-for-granted joys in nature and human affairs—and even made prophecies of doom. There was a clamour of fears and hopes, philosophical treatises, outpourings in religious ecstasy, love lyrics, folk romances—they were all there, rich in form and content since the eleventh century A.D., when the first extant work in an older form of Kashmiri, *Chhumma Sampraday* was composed by an unknown author. This work is a collection of verses on certain esoteric practices of a Tantric sect.

The next Kashmiri work which we find is the thirteenth century classic, *Mahanaya Prakash* by Sitikanth. This too is an attempt to gather together *sutras* of Shaivite philosophy and Tantric meditative practices. The next landmark is in the fourteenth century when we see the towering figures of the great mystic poetess Lal Ded and Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali, (popularly known as Nundrishi) who belonged to the Rishi order of Kashmir, a variation of Sufism.

The *Vakhs* of the former and the *Shruks* of the latter (different metrical forms in which their poetry is composed) became the principles and maxims by which the Kashmiris understood the meaning of life and the way it should be lived.

All these extant works are religious and contemplative in nature. The growth of secular literature took time. The first written attempt at story-telling was made in the middle of the fifteenth century : *Banasurkatha* by Avtar Bhatt, one of the poets in King Zain-ul-Abidin's court, tells a stirring tale of love and war.

Poetic expression in Kashmiri reached a higher degree of lyrical intensity in the sensitive and technically perfect poems, of two women—the poetess-queen Habba Khatoon (1553-1605) and Arnimaal (1737-78). Their poignantly evocative love poems, set to lilting folk and classical tunes, are extremely popular and a valuable part of Kashmiri folk and *sufiana* music.

The most important poet to enrich the tradition set by them is Rasul Mir (?-1870), whose *ghazals* equal the best in lyrical love poetry anywhere in world literature.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, story-telling in verse came into its own in the *Masnavi*, a genre in Kashmiri poetry inspired in form and content by Persian literature. *Yusuf Zulekha* by Mehmood Gami (1765-1855), *Gulrez* by Maqbool Shah Kralwari (1820-1875), *Shahnama* by Wahab Parray (1845-1914) and *Chandar Badan* by Azizullah Haqquani (1854-1928) have become a vital part of Kashmiri folk tradition.

Prose writing appeared only in the nineteenth century in the form of translation or propaganda pieces. Meanwhile, religious poetry continued to be written. The *vakhs* of Rupa Bhawani (1625-?) are contemplative, rather sombre in tone, while the *leelas* and narratives by Parmanand based on episodes from the childhood of Krishna (1795-1885), are driven by an ecstasy of love. Krishna Joo Razdan's (1848-1925) *leelas* have a limpid clarity and vigour.

A significant and uniquely Kashmiri contribution to religious poetry is that of the mystic poets of the Sufi tradition. Swacha Kral (?-1857), Nyama Sahab (1805-1880) and Shams Faqir (1843-1904) are notable for the intensity of religious feeling, the pain of separation from the Beloved and the power of word, symbol and metaphor in their *ghazals*. They continue to be sung and are extremely popular even with lay audiences who may not understand the subtleties of their quest into the primal issues of "Being and Nothingness", or the answers to the question of the relationship between the seeker and the sought. The modern poets who followed the various streams are far too many to mention within the scope of this introduction. Mehjoor (1885-1952), Azaad (1903-1948), Zinda Kaul (1884-1965), Ghulam Rasool Nazki (1901-), Nadim (1916-1988), Rahi (1925-) and so many others must ring familiar to even those who do not know Kashmiri. The *vakh, shruk, vatsun, leela, ghazal, masnavi* and *dastan*—to name just a few of the metrical forms in which Kashmiri poetry is written—have become a part of ordinary discourse among people in Kashmir, sung by generation after generation, passed on in an oral tradition. Women also sing these songs at festive occasions while swaying to the rhythmic steps of the *roff*.

The tragedy of this language, however, is that very few of even those who are born to it can read or write it, for which there are certain historical reasons.

Through centuries of foreign rule, the Kashmiri language was relegated to the backyard. Most written communication from the fourteenth century onwards was Persian. Its place was taken by Urdu in the late nineteenth century. In the process, Kashmiri lost its original script, *Sharada* (older than the Devanagari script), which came to be identified only with the Brahmins who constituted an extremely small minority. The Kashmiri language had no place in the school curriculum. Familiarity with its literature (in verse) was restricted to folk and *sufiana* (Kashmiri classical music) singers who memorised the poems and set them to tune. For the masses, particularly the rural folk, there was the popular institution of the "Teller of Tales", which is not dead, but is mostly heard on the radio now. Crowds would gather round the man and his group of musicians, who acted as his chorus, as he narrated long sagas in song. His repertoire consisted of stories from Persian literature, but one very popular saga was entirely Kashmiri in origin and spirit—the "Ziny Mozoor" which told of the fortunes of a wood-cutter.

Kashmir also had a lively folk-theatre of its own known as "Bhand Paethar" in which the writer/actors would take up the main theme from the lives of kings and heroes and cleverly give it a contemporary relevance, highlighting social or other issues. Satire flourished through the medium of this theatre, which was very close to the heart and pulse of the masses.

During the long period of enslavement (about five centuries) such was the sense of inferiority in the Kashmiris that the use of the mother tongue became an embarrassment and a sign of illiteracy and backwardness. It is interesting to note that as the Kashmiris migrated to other parts of India in search of work and livelihood from the seventeenth century onwards, among the first things they cast off on leaving the valley, was their language. (Another item that had been cast off was the *pheran*, but it has returned with a vengeance and gone on to conquer the world of fashion). It was only in the 1930s when the Kashmiris' self-respect began to assert itself and they searched for symbols of their distinct identity—*Kashmiriyat*—that the importance of the mother tongue dawned on them. For the first time serious efforts were made to evolve a script.

Almost simultaneous efforts were made by Kashmiri pandit and muslim scholars to write Kashmiri in the Devanagari and the Persian scripts. Of course neither script had signs for all the Kashmiri vowels, so new signs were devised. The divide in the script created more problems than it solved. It was only in the 1960s that a modified Persian script with standardised phonetic signs was developed and accepted. But for the large majority of Kashmiris it still means learning almost an entirely new language—obviously a deterrent to all but the most determined.

Modern writers who chose to write in Kashmiri did so only after they had first written in Urdu or Hindi. It was almost as if they had been overcome by guilt. And readership was not guaranteed. Many writers won recognition only through literary assemblies where they read out their work or because their poems were popular enough to be sung. Many prefaces to Kashmiri publications begin on a painfully despondent, almost apologetic note, expressing an apprehension whether there would be any readers at all. In the preface to his collection of short stories entitled, *Tsakra Vyuh*, Hriday Kaul Bharati, a writer of great talent, wonders to whom he is addressing his work!

In this dismal scenario, it comes as a pleasant surprise to discover that though the bulk of literature remains unknown outside Kashmir, some poetry—both old and modern—has been introduced to non-Kashmiris through translation and is available to the English reading public in books published by the Sahitya Academy as well as private publishers. However, the Kashmiri short story has appeared only in journals and magazines. It is this area of darkness that I propose to shed some light upon. I thought that any introduction to an alien literature must begin with a genre with which readers today are not only most familiar and comfortable, but what is more important, have time for.

The birth of the Kashmiri short story coincided with the end of monarchical rule in Kashmir, which marked the culmination of the phase in the struggle for freedom launched in 1931 and the establishment of a people's Government in 1947. The first attempts in the genre, two short stories, one by the eminent poet Dina Nath "Nadim" and the other by Som Nath Zutshi—*Jawabi Card* and *Yeli Gash Phol* respectively, were published in the newly born journal "Kong Posh", in 1952.

Once in power, the new establishment had encouraged the formation of a "cultural front" not just to counter hostile propaganda, but also to propagate democratic, secular and socialistic ideas among the people. Suddenly literature found that it had to be committed to official ideology in order not only to grow, but to survive. To be fair, "official patronage" was not a dirty phrase at that time. The manifesto of the party which had just come to power was a radical document known as "Naya Kashmir" (the new Kashmir), and it dared to dream of a future free from all the ills of an oppressive system, under which the common man had suffered in one way or the other. It clearly spelt out a programme of action for social, economic and political transformation.

The beginnings in the genre were tentative and self-conscious, not only because most of the practitioners of the craft owed allegiance to an ideology, but also because of the direct influence of the "Progressive Writers" of the sub-continent who wrote in Urdu and Hindi and whose work they used as a model.

However, it was a strange love-hate relationship with the leading lights of the "Progressive" movement. On the one hand they were admired, even imitated, but on the other, their portrayal of Kashmir as "a beautiful land and its equally beautiful, innocent but poverty stricken and victimised people", provoked resentment as it generated stereotypes and its tone seemed to be condescending. Krishan Chander, the Urdu novelist and short story writer and Upendra Nath Ashk, who were among those who had set a number of their tales in the valley of Kashmir, especially came in for criticism in the wave of subnationalism. The first major talents in the art of the short story in Kashmir, Ali Mohammad Lone, Akhtar Mohi-ud-din and Amin Kamil, deliberately attempted to break away from the myths and stereotypes.

The writers rode the new found vehicle of the short story well, and, quickly learning the skills and the technique, cruised along comfortably on the roads they were familiar with. There were no sharp turns or diversions in those early, heady, forward-looking days when "wits were young" and belief in human perfectibility was firm and easy to sustain. Almost everyone showed at that time the signs—rather symptoms—of the "disease of optimism"! The style of writing was realistic, with nature thrown in for good measure. Against this backdrop the little dramas of day-to-day life with its simple concerns unfolded. The themes in general were the plight of the downtrodden and the wretched, victims of political and social inequality, illiteracy and backwardness. Often the focus was on unjust social customs flourishing in a feudal, oppressive system. The writers hoped to prove their commitment to society by highlighting material problems common to a mass of the people. Obviously the inference was that by focussing attention on these, they would educate and influence opinion and bring about reform in society. This, however, proved a fond dream; idealism was not enough. When it encountered the hard reality of life and its demands, it faltered and realised its ineffectuality, and a long shadow fell between the dream and the reality. Popular enthusiasm seemed to wither away and energies were dissipated in currying favour with a ruling elite that would become increasingly withdrawn from the masses and their aspirations. The prevailing atmosphere of political uncertainty made fertile ground for the growth of a new kind of exploitaton. With the spread of education, expectations had been aroused and they could not all be fulfilled.

The pace of development also slackened, confronted by a resources crunch and the almost impossible-to-eradicate menace of corruption. While the key operators of the system and its institutions lost a sense of purpose and became committed to their own perpetuation in authority, a feeling of disillusionment became widespread. Hari Krishan Koul's short story "Tomorrow" is a powerful indictment of an uncaring, impersonal and insensitive institution like a Government school, that provides nothing but employment to so-called teachers.

Confronted by forces over which they no longer seemed to have any control, many writers turned inwards, seeking refuge in their own fantasies, sometimes leading to a surrealist nightmare. Anis Hamadani's "The Burnt Out Sun" and Nayeema Ahmad's "I am Still Alive" are examples of the horrible visions that can haunt the imagination of a witness to a violation of everything beautiful or valued.

Another option a writer has is to depict reality as it is. Avtar Krishna 'Rehbar' and Bansi 'Nirdosh's' stories are examples of this—a sympathetic portrayal of the middle class man or woman caught in economic or social tensions, without fanfare or flourish, quite in tune with the drabness of their lives.

The option to laugh at the whole sad, unhappy scene as though it were not of much consequence and no matter how profound the trauma, dismiss it with a nonchalant shrug, has also been exercised. "This Too shall Pass!" is a common attitude with the Kashmiris. It enables them to go through ordeals without letting their spirit break. Nazir Jehangir's story, "The Boy is Guilty", is a good example of this.

The angst born of accidents of history—or geography—which not only divide human beings from each other, but also turn them into exiles, is also a popular theme with writers. Instances of this concern are provided by Abdul Ghani Athar's "The Enemy", Avtar Krishna 'Rehbar's' "Anguish" and Hirday Koul Bharati's "The Stranger Beside Me" (the last named is also a good example of how an ancient myth can be used to highlight present alienations with startling effect).

The option of symbolic representation—always a safe one in uncertain, turbulent, even violent times—has also been frequently used in the Kashmiri short story. The story "The Voice" by the celebrated painter Ghulam Rasool Santosh is illustrative of this.

Now a word about the major short story writers whose work has been included in this volume.

Ali Mohammad Lone (1927-1990) began with the ideology of political protest against an exploitative system and his stories were fashioned around these very ideas. He was influenced by Marxism and Existentialism and his latest stories strive for a harmony between the individual and his environment. Unfortunately his stories have not been published in a volume hence the choice before a translator is limited.

Akhtar Mohi-ud-din (1928-) began as a realistic writer with a social consciousness, whose writings highlighted the ills of feudalism and the exploitative institutions it cultivated and upheld. But as his skill grew and his art matured, his eye turned towards universal predicaments: ennui, the ravages of time, against which no system has built a defence, the unanswerable questions raised by the human situation itself and for which blame cannot be laid on any real or imagined oppressor. The story "The Second Meeting", with its poetic preoccupation with the cruelty of age and time, is in sharp contrast with his earlier work.

Amin Kamil (1924-) is basically a poet, whose earlier work in fiction was characterised by an ironic view of life's little situations, which had all the elements of dramatic conflict on a miniature scale. But with the passage of time, the shadow of ancient fears compounded by present horror darkens the landscape in his stories. His artistic vision has acquired a rather bleak, cynical overtone, while his style has been honed to border on austerity.

Bansi 'Nirdosh' (1928-) is a good teller of tales, quite prolific. His stories about common situations in a lower middle class set up, have a punch line at the end, a kind of ironic twist which reminds one of the European short story. They are like an illuminating flash, a significant moment caught on film as it were, which holds the characters and their environment together in a satisfying "Unity of action". His canvas is limited, no doubt, but while working within its confines, he makes a valid statement; his insights into Kashmiri society being quite powerful.

Hriday Kaul Bharati (1936-) has broken fresh ground in the field of the short story by introducing themes and techniques not been used before. New sensibilities and a forceful exposure of the sicknesses associated with modernism are some of the original features of his style. His characters are victims of an unsympathetic, man-made environment, trapped in situations from which they cannot escape. Bharati charts the so far unmapped territory of the mind, analysing the springs of human action and the passions generated in uncaring, impersonal surroundings. There is also an effort—not always successful—to weave an existentialist angst into the life of the common man in Kashmir. The use of symbols is an integral part of his story-telling.

Hari Krishan Koul (1934-) is one of the most talented, original and successful of Kashmiri short story writers. There is an effortlessness of narration, a skill in creating realistic, wholly convincing characters—some of them social dropouts, even lumpens—which make his stories integrated artistic creations. There is no laboured working out of a theme or the imposition of an ideology, just a smooth progression of events building up to a forceful social or political statement. The hypocrisy, corruption and dehumanisation in which his people are forced to live their pitiful lives are exposed with a skilful use of irony, creating many instances of black humour. One of his strongest points is dialogue, which he has a great facility in framing and which gives his stories dramatic flavour, apart from individualising characters so well.

Rattan Lal Shant's (1938-) forte lies in tracing human relationships in their complexities and many layers. His plots are constructed around the social strata he is most familiar with and therefore quite plausible.

In their quest for substance, strength and vigour, Kashmiri short story writers have also drawn heavily upon tradition, myth, fable, allegory and symbolic leitmotifs in which old Kashmiri literature abounds.

Finally, a word about the translation. The attempt has been to remain as faithful to the original idiom as possible. It is hoped that the attempt is successful and will arouse the interest of readers to get better acquainted with the "Stranger Beside Them"!

Srinagar ***Neerja Mattoo***

The Mourners

◆

Hari Krishan Koul

Tarzan's sister-in-law sat before the *chulha*. She was out of breath with the effort of blowing into the damp firewood and cow-dung cakes, but they refused to kindle. The small kitchen was filled with smoke. Dakter asked her, "Where is he? Dead as a log as usual?"

The smoke from the wet firewood stung her eyes and the sight of Dakter standing before her infuriated her further. She wanted to pick up a smouldering stick from the *chulha* and with it, break every bone in his and his friend's body. On this bitterly cold morning why had he come to tempt her brother-in-law to go God knows where? But then she thought, why blame him—it was the fault of your own hen if she went to lay her eggs in somebody else's yard. He read the meaning in her silence and saying, "Still sleeping, no doubt," started going up the stairs. He could hear her grumbling, but being in a hurry, he did not stop to give her a piece of his mind.

"Get up you rogue. Pedro is finished," he declared as soon as he entered the room. Curled up like a bundle on the bed, Tarzan sat up at the news. He could not quite comprehend the meaning but knew that something was wrong. "Fellow's mother is dead," Dakter said, sitting down near the pillow. Tarzan stretched his arm to push the window open. An old blanket, torn in many places, was spread over the quilt and over it, his woollen *pheran*. The pillow was red chintz but without a cover and had been absorbing the grease from his hair for no one knew how long. On his right hand side lay a number of cut-outs of movie queens from film magazines and tabloids. On his left was a cigarette pack containing a half-smoked cold stub and two whole cigarettes.

"When?" he asked.

"Early morning today, they say." Dakter took out a cigarette from the packet and lit it from the embers in his *kangri*. "But I think the old woman must have kicked the bucket sometime during the night itself and the fellow would not have come to know till the morning. The rogue was on his own trip."

"How mean of him—on a trip without us!"

"I didn't know of it either. But I heard that there was a big do at Patwari's place. If I give you the guest list the earth will shake under your feet."

"Then the rascal is sunk. Which wretched fellow led him to that den? Five-rupee notes are showered, as it were, on the cards there day and night. Pass me a cigarette, will you?" Dakter gave him the other cigarette from the pack.

"Give me the *kangri* too." He handed it to him.

Tarzan lit the cigarette from the embers and drew the *kangri* under his quilt. "Now the rascal can live it up. His mother was the last check and she too has sailed off. Now he may as well sell his house and blow it up on cards . . . who is to stop him?"

"Take my word for it—the house will go."

"Yes, but what do we do now?"

"Which son-in-law is there to take the old woman to the cremation ground? Get up and gird your loins."

"My loins are already girded. Come on, bring all the mothers and fathers who need my shoulders to cart them to their cremation."

Tarzan left the bed, put on his *pheran*, wore a thick balaclava on his head to cover his ears, pulled out three pairs of socks from under the pillow and put them on. Handing the *kangri* to Dakter, he said, "Let's go, I'm ready."

"Hold on, will you. Let's finish the fag at least."

"Okay. Carry on. The old woman did not show any hurry while alive, why should she be in a hurry now?"

Tarzan picked up a *kangri* from the ledge and gave it a thorough shaking so that the ashes settled down at the bottom and the charcoal nuggets were thrown up. He asked Dakter for a live coal, put it among the nuggets in his *kangri* and, blowing upon it furiously, kindled a warm blaze.

"Won't you fill fresh charcoal in your *kangri*?"

"Forget it. It's better to ask the baker in the street to give me some from his oven. Why provoke taunts on the matter of a *kangri*-full of live coals early in the morning? What's the score?"

"Who cares."

"If they can take six wickets in today's play, they might win."

"Like hell they will," Dakter made a gesture with his thumb, "As if this is the only match left for them to win! As if they have triumphed in all the others!"

They had walked out of the room when Dakter went back and returned with the half-smoked stub stuck behind his ear, "Why leave it?" he said to Tarzan.

Slowly they descended the stairs. Tarzan's sister-in-law stood watching them from her doorway. As they were leaving, she mumbled in her mixed Punjabi-Kashmiri, "What does he care? No sooner does the day dawn than he must saunter forth—a *babu,* no less, with his scents and oils! Stuffs his belly with mounds of rice but does he care where it comes from? Only I know or my fate knows!"

"Hey, where did your brother acquire this Punjabi pigeon?" Dakter asked Tarzan as they walked away.

"Come on, at least he's got a pigeon, whatever sort. As for us, we shall not get even this".

"Talk about yourself. As for me, I have a love affair going!"

Tarzan looked him up and down and burst into laughter.

In the street, Tarzan had his *kangri* filled with hot, glowing mulberry charcoals from the baker's, picked up three packs of cigarettes from the grocer on credit and, pushing them down his *pheran* pocket, said, "Now I am equipped to take the whole bloody town to its cremation—absolutely at your service!"

"Didn't you ask the baker the score?"

"His transistor batteries are exhausted." He took two cigarettes from the pack, gave one to Dakter and lit one for himself. Dakter threw away the half-smoked stub.

"I had thought I would spend the whole day listening to the commentary. How could I expect this nuisance to turn up? Today of all days! Tell me, how soon can we be free?"

"One o'clock—maybe two."

"Shall we listen to the commentary or . . . " Tarzan remembered something and did not complete the sentence. Instead he asked, "Shall we go to this one?"

"Stupid!"

"The other one?"

"The same old headache."

"To this side of the river?"

"Who knows! It was released only yesterday."

"The other side?"

"Heard it's good."

"If we are free by one o'clock, we will go to see it, otherwise the commentary."

"I'll not sit in the third class this time."

Tarzan stared at him for a while and said, "Since when have you acquired a taste for balcony seats to watch a film?"

* * *

When Pedro realised that his mother had turned to clay, he did not weep or cry. He just went quietly to Pahelwan's house, who first informed Seth and then went to fetch the Brahmin priest. On the way he met Dakter's younger brother through whom he sent word to Dakter. Seth stuffed fifty-sixty rupees in his pocket and went to the store which stocked all the stuff needed for the rites at a Hindu funeral. It was only after all this had been done that Pedro started to wail loudly, calling out his dead mother's name. This brought a few neighbours, who formed a small gathering in the house.

Pedro had no relatives in town other than a cousin's husband from his mother's side. And he too lived at a distance of five or six miles. Pedro did not send a message to him. Even if he had, he would not have turned up, Pedro was certain. In fact, Pedro hated all his relatives, whether they lived in the town or the village. It was only his mother who had served as a bond between him and his relatives. Today that bond too was broken with her death. Now he was free—free in every way. He did not have to salute or bow before his relatives. He did not have to perform the ritual *shraddha* for his father every year. He did not need to return home every night. He could do exactly what he wanted. From now on he could be his own master—the master of his own house too.

Pahelwan arrived with the priest an hour later. One woman from the neighbourhood began to warm the water to give the corpse the ritual bath. Another swept a corner of the yard and smeared it with cow-dung paste to purify it for the performance of the last rites. The priest began. Pedro was shifting his sacred thread from the left to the right shoulder and back again according to the priest's instructions, when Dakter and Tarzan arrived. Tarzan went directly to Pedro and whispered in his ear, "Got any money?"

"Yes, yes I have."

"Swear upon this very mother?"

"I swear upon my mother. I do have money."

"That's all right then." He went and took his seat on an upturned mortar in a corner of the yard. When the corpse was being bathed, he got up and said to Pahelwan, "The old woman is selfish even after death. Look at her—she will have a warm bath herself but make poor Pedro take those icy dips in the river!"

After the bath a shroud was wrapped around the body and it was placed upon a plank of wood. Tarzan and Seth lifted it from the two front ends; the third at the back was shouldered by Dakter. Pahelwan was about to offer his shoulder for the fourth corner when Seth yelled, "Hey you *mullah*, don't you touch it! Our corpse will be polluted."

"Oh hell. If the old lady finds out that a Muslim shoulder carries her, she will leap out of the coffin," Tarzan said.

"Okay, give her a ride yourselves. But remember, it will only be a Muslim who prepares her pyre at the cremation ground. Come, come, my brothers-in-law, we are the ones who bring you into the world and again it is us who preside over your bodies while they turn into ashes—telling me, are you?"

Eventually a boy from the neighbourhood made the foursome and the last journey began. Pedro walked in front, carrying a basket containing all the material needed for the cremation rites. Next to him, wrapped in a thick blanket from head to toe, walked the priest. He had hated to leave home in this bitter cold and was thinking, "A doctor can refuse to attend, a lawyer can refuse to come, but curse our profession, which does not give the right of refusal! Besides, who knows if there will be anything to gain from this wretched fellow!"

Behind Pedro and the priest came Tarzan, Seth, Dakter and the boy, carrying the coffin. After them walked Pahelwan and a few others from the neighbourhood. The neighbours accompanied the funeral profession a short distance and then returned home.

Pedro walked straight ahead, carrying the funerary basket. At first he had thought that with his mother's death, he had been set free. But now it appeared that it had made him a homeless vagrant. The rope that had anchored him to the shore was broken and he was adrift in the flood of life. He would keep on drifting without any goal or safe shore as long as he lived. His mother used to curse him, heap abuse on him but occasionally did give him a blessing too. She would quarrel with him over the daily expenses nearly every day but at the end of the month it was she who gave him something, saved God knows how and when, for his cigarettes. Most of the time she sulked, angry with his ways, but sometimes she would hold him in her arms and give him a tight hug. From now onwards no one would mind his ways—no one to sulk nor to love him. As far as he was concerned, no other death need matter to him nor his own to anyone. He was alone in this journey—all alone, and the road was tough. Suddenly he looked back and the ground slipped from under his feet. He really was walking all alone, clutching the funerary basket. No one else was in sight—neither the priest nor the coffin nor even those who had held it aloft. What did it mean? Was he dreaming? Was this a trick played upon him by the Lord of Death? Eventually he caught sight of the priest lighting a cigarette at a shop in the distance and he breathed again. But where were the others? Had the earth swallowed them or the sky devoured them?

The priest, his cigarette lit, found him standing alone, frowning worriedly and said, "Listen, you. I don't know what is written in your fate. Those *rakshashas* must have slipped on the ice and dropped the body on the frozen ground. What has happened is very bad indeed."

In his heart Pedro also knew that he was ill-destined. The priest had not lied. But the riddle of their disappearance plagued his mind. How and where could they have vanished? Granted they might have slipped but would that bury them in the bowels of the earth?

The Brahmin mumbled a prayer in his faulty, ill-pronounced Sanskrit, "Oh Lord of Death, Shiva Shiva Shambhu, forgive me my transgressions!"

The lamp in Pedro's basket had been long extinguished. A streak of smoke rose from its blackened wick. Pedro was not only bewildered but quite frightened too.

Some more time passed and then he saw something—a faint outline resembling a coffin. He breathed a sigh of relief. At last his mother's coffin caught up with him. "Three have fallen!" Tarzan shouted as he came abreast. The priest's heart stopped. "Oh you demons! Did you let the corpse fall three times? God save us. Oh the Lord have mercy on me," he cried in horror.

"Oh no sir. Our lion Chandra has taken three wickets! Understand?"

"Shut up you rogue." Seth bit his lip trying to check his anger, "By the Holy Prophet, this is the limit."

Pahelwan explained to Pedro, "Listen you cursed fool! As we reached the Shahi Panwallah, it seemed as though a break had been applied to Tarzan's feet. The wretch stopped to listen to the commentary. We kept pleading with him to get a move on. The *panwallah* even went to the extent of laying his cap at his feet. When the people saw us listening to the commentary with the coffin, they began to curse us. But Tarzan's feet refused to budge. Finally the *panwallah* switched off his radio."

"Listen brothers. For the last seventy years this old lady never showed any urgency to reach her destination. So how does my ten minutes' delay matter now?" Tarzan defended himself.

"Tell him to hold his tongue!" Seth exploded, shaking with rage. "If he does not shut up, I'll throw the old woman down and run away from here."

The priest admonished Pedro, "Oh you *rakshasa*! Are you a man or a beast? I swear, this is the last time I ever . . . but then why should you care? Whose death need worry you?"

On reaching the cremation ground, Tarzan, Seth, Dakter and the boy lowered their burden to the ground. The Muslim contractor of cremations started building the pyre. Pedro awaited the priest's instructions.

Tarzan spoke up, "Did you hear this one? This Dakter has a love affair going!" There were guffaws from all.

Pahelwan confronted Dakter, "Love? With whom?"

Tarzan intervened, "Hear the story from me. This fellow's "love" is going on with his boss's wife!" The boy from the neighbourhood was slightly embarrassed.

"He does all their housework. Washes her saris and blouses. Presses clothes. Hey, do you get anything for your pains? Or is it for free?"

"See this fist? It will break all the teeth in your mouth. She is my mother," Dakter said angrily.

"Why do you taunt him?" Pahelwan asked Tarzan. "Tell me, do you or do you not frequent your factory owner's house?"

"My foot! Going to his house will not make me a manager. I have no desire to become a leader like you." And raising his voice so that everyone could hear, he continued, "Did you people hear this? This Pahelwan has given up his "leadery"!"

"Since when?" Dakter was surprised.

"Ever since the day the police arrested him while he was pasting pro-Pakistani posters on the city walls. Those who had entrusted him with the task spread the word that he was caught picking pockets."

Everyone laughed. A shadow of annoyance passed over Pahelwan's face for a moment.

"Get up and place the body on the pyre," the priest's words roused them and all the four stood up.

"We are ready," Tarzan said, "If you like, for you too!" But the priest did not hear him.

Flames were no longer rising from the pyre, just the glowing embers, crackling and disintegrating into ashes. Seth laid his hand on Pedro's shoulder, "Come, what is the use of staring at this heap?"

"Let's go." Pedro leaned on him and started walking way.

"Where is Tarzan?" he asked.

"Has he also bolted like the priest and the boy? But where could he have gone?" Dakter asked.

"I know," Pahelwan said, "the wretched fellow must be listening to the commentary somewhere. Can't tell the difference between mid-on and silly mid-on but must pretend to be an authority on cricket! He should not have let the community down like this."

"He certainly shouldn't have," Seth agreed.

They reached the boundary of the cremation ground. Pedro, Dakter and Seth had turned back to bow to the smouldering pyre when Pahelwan shouted, "Look! Who is that behind the *chinar*?"

"Oh, if it isn't our own Tarzan!" said Dakter. All the four walked back to him.

Tarzan sat against the *chinar*, staring at the still smoke still hanging in the air. Pedro took his hand and said, "Come along, *yaar*, what's there to wait for?" Tarzan drew Pedro to himself and hugging him, said, "You lit your mother's pyre today with your own hands, but I was too small at that time—just six or seven months old. I could not even do this."

Both Tarzan and Pedro burst into tears. They cried bitterly. Dakter and Pahelwan did not know how to handle this new development. Dakter was ready to scold them but Pahelwan checked him with a gesture, "Let them be. That is what all of us need—a good cry."

The Enemy

A G Athar

I walked past the Indian picket. It was about noon. No one was in sight. Perhaps they were fast asleep or relaxing. They could not imagine that any mother's son would dare cross the border in broad daylight. Bathed in sweat, I raced like a train. My brother's face danced before my eyes. The messenger had said that his condition was critical. In that habitation on the Neelam River bank, he could call no one his own.

I lived on the other bank and bore the stamp of India on my brow while he, right across the narrow river, had Pakistan carved on his. The messenger's words were, "He only mutters your name in delirium." How could I check myself after such news? After all, it was a bond of blood.

I had reached the Athmuqam Bridge. His hut lay on the bank right ahead. It would take me just five minutes to get there. Like a thief, I stole a glance left and right, clenched my fists and darted across. Barely had I run a few steps when there was a loud shout—"Halt!" I stood, paralysed. I looked up and saw them—two towering soldiers, rifles ready, straddling the bridge and heading my way.

They read the stamp on my brow and one of the two spoke, "Indian!" The other pronounced, "Arrest him." "No, no, sir, I am not an Indian. Neither am I a Pakistani. I am only a Kashmiri. Do you see sir, that log hut at Keran? That is my home. And you see that log hut on the other bank? That is where my brother lives. He is very ill and has no one but God to call his own over there. Please, sir, give me just half an hour—I need only to ask him how he is, get him some medicine, a drink of water, maybe."

A rifle butt hit my neck and the earth shook under my feet. They dragged me to their bunker. More soldiers—they also read the tell-tale stamp and declared, "Indian. An enemy spy." And then began the torture. I was told that I must confess straightaway that I was an Indian spy and an enemy of Pakistan.

What was I supposed to confess? That I was my brother's enemy?

I was taken to the headquarters, adjacent to my brother's hut. Again I pleaded with them, "Please sir, my brother is in a hut next door. He is seriously ill, sir. Please let me go to him, handcuffed as I am—just to ask him how he is."

But they would not listen. They peeled off my nails, threw salt on the wounds and I fell unconscious. Next I found my brother lying alongside, gasping for breath, begging for water and I, manacled and bound in chains. No sign of water anywhere. The sharp point of a handcuff pierced my left arm and blood poured out. I cupped my right hand, collected the liquid and stretched it towards my brother to quench his thirst. The chains binding my hand did not let it reach his parched lips. At last, a desperate cry for water, a hiccup, and then the death-rattle. I screamed—"It is all over, finished, the human mind, its thinking—which breaks God's kingdom into fragments and calls a brother his own brother's enemy."

I woke up with a start and saw tears flowing from the eyes of the mustachioed soldiers. They asked me to look out of the window and I saw it—my brother's shrouded body placed in a coffin.

"Let me go—let me see my brother's face—offer a last prayer for him—that's my brother, do you know?"

They said that they knew very well that the dead man was my brother but they could not let me participate in his burial rites. "We are helpless," they concluded.

"Seek permission from your officers, please," I begged.

"They too are helpless," they said.

"From the officers" officers, then," I pleaded.

"They too are helpless," was the reply.

"Who is it that can help? Who has the power?" I asked.

"That is something we do not know."

Tomorrow?

◆

Hari Krishan Koul

As the boys went into their classrooms after the prayers, Sula of Class IV said to Makhana, "Learnt the multiplication tables set by Nilakanth, have you"

"Tried to, but just can't memorise the damn things."

"What shall we do? Lord Yama's own messenger he is." Makhana's face turned pale. Sula laughed carelessly and handed something to him quietly. "Here, rub it on your hands."

"What is it?"

"Sheep's fat. Go on, apply it on your hand, then the caning will not hurt."

"Swear by your father?" Makhana was rather incredulous.

"May my father die if I am not telling the truth. Look, I am also applying it on my hands."

The two friends went on quietly applying the fat on their palms through the first four periods and the recess. Nilakanth's period came after the recess. As soon as he entered the classroom, he took off his turban and placed it on the broken down shell of a cupboard. Then he sat down, unbuttoned his coat and shirt, and began to scratch his hairy chest. Spreading out his legs, he farted while asking the boys to recite the multiplication tables. After six boys, came Makhana's turn. He did all right initially but then be faltered. Nilakanth grabbed his ear and pulling him, dragged him towards himself. Makhana stole a glance at his hands.

They were glistening with fat. But Nilakanth did not cane him. He surveyed the class and his eye fell on Sula who appeared to be the most well built and tough and he said, "Hey you, Sula fatso, come here. Give this Makhana a ride on your back." Sula had been quietly trying to memorise his tables. Hearing the order, he folded his book and put it back in the bundle on the piece of cloth in which he carried them. He stood up and glancing at Makhana gave a chuckle and lifted him on his back. Nilakanth pulled up Makhana's shirt and began to cane the tender flesh with a thin stick. Makhana screamed, "Oh father dear, oh mother mine—I'm dead. Sir, I'll memorise it tomorrow, I promise I will. Oh my father, I'm dead. Sir—Masterji—please spare me today sir, may God send all your misfortunes upon me! Sir, Masterji! May I die instead of you, Masterji! Tomorrow I'll have everything by heart, you will see sir."

"Are you telling the truth?" Nilakanth asked.

"The truth sir—if I don't have them at the tip of my tongue tomorrow, please skin me alive."

"In that case, let's leave him," Nilakanth told Sula and then turned to the class, "Will all of you have learnt the tables till No. 16 tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," everyone yelled—Sula the loudest.

"All those who did not know them today, will now touch their ear lobes in shame." Half a dozen boys did so and

Makhana before everyone else.

At 4 p.m. the two friends left school to walk home together. Just as Sula began to say something, Makhana snapped at him, "Shut up, you—I've seen your friendship very well!"

"Ah, ha! Did we carry you on our back of our own wish? We only did what Masterji asked us to do."

"Rogue! Showing off the sheep's fat indeed!"

"How was I to know that he would hit your bottom? You should have applied the fat on your buttocks—then it would not have hurt."

"Keep your mouth shut or I'll break all your teeth!"

They had reached the main road and standing there was the Convent School bus. The children were alighting while their mothers waited for them. The boys and girls were in uniform—white shirts, red neckties, red socks, black shoes and green shorts or skirts. They all carried little lunch boxes. Something happened to Makhana—he kept staring at a blue-eyed little girl. Sula was watching a little boy with hair like silk and milk white legs. It appeared that the little boy had not eaten his lunch because his mother was telling him, "But why didn't you tell me that you do not like *kofta*? I would have given you some mutton. Or a couple of eggs. There were some pieces of fish left over from yesterday's curry—you could have had those. But why did you have to starve yourself?"

The boy only smiled in return.

Suddenly a thought came to Sula and he asked, "What did they cook in your home today?"

"Two kinds of greens."

"Just as wretched as I thought!"

Perhaps Makhana did not hear him. He was wondering, "Who could the blue-eyed one be? Whose child was she?"

The next day, when the bell rang and all the boys assembled in the compound for prayers, Sula happened to look back. He turned deathly pale. He saw his father talking to the Headmaster outside the school gate. His instinct was to dash out, but the peon stood at the gate menacingly. The lump of fat still lay in his pocket—he had not yet used it on his hands. After a while the Headmaster returned and the peon shut the gate.

"Sula of Class IV will step out," the Headmaster ordered. Sula's knees trembled as he moved forward.

"Do you know what this fellow Sula was doing at home yesterday?" the Headmaster addressed the boys, swinging his cane.

"No, sir," the boys shouted at the top of their voices.

"A regular riot he has created at home last evening! Broken the pots and pans and bitten his mother's thumb. And do you know why?"

"No, sir."

"He told his parents that he wanted hot rice and curry!"

"Hot rice and curry? Ha ha ha . . ." all the boys laughed.

"Should he have asked for these things?"

"No, sir."

"If they give you cold rice, that is what you should eat. If they give you greens, that is what you must eat. If they give you nothing, you must keep quiet—isn't that so?"

"Yes, sir."

The Headmaster proceeded to cane Sula—a dozen times on each hand and finally asked the Maulvi Saheb to bite his left thumb. Sula bore the pain of the beatings somehow, but the bite drew a shriek from him and he fell down in a heap. Two hard kicks from the Headmaster sent him back to his place in the line.

The prayers began. Two boys from Class V—Javed Ahmad and Ashok Kumar stepped forward and started to sing in Urdu; *Lab pe ati hai dua banke tamanna meri, zindagi shama ki soorat ho khudaya meri* This wish comes as a prayer upon my lips. Oh Lord, make my life like that of the candle.

The rest of the boys repeated the words after them as loudly as they could. Sula, his voice choked with sobs, sang through his tears, *Door duniya ka mere dum se andhera ho jai, har jagah mere chamakne se ujala ho jai!* May the darkness of the world be dispelled through me. May there be light everywhere that I shine.

The prayers over, the boys went to their respective classes. Seeing Sula's small, reddened eyes, Makhana's heart softened towards him and all of yesterday's anger was washed away. What if his own father were alive today? He would also have been coming to school sometimes to have him thrashed. Good that he had only a mother. She beat him, no doubt, but would not come to the school with a complaint. But the very next moment he remembered Nilakanth and he also remembered that he had still not memorised the tables. Asking Sula for the fat did not seem quite right. Besides, he had no faith in it any more. The problem exercised his mind, but eventually he thought his own remedy the best: he took the Goddess Kali's name seven times and tied a knot in his shirt.

After the recess, Nilakanth entered the classroom. As usual, he took off his turban and put it on the broken down cupboard, slipped his feet out of his pumps and sat cross-legged in his chair. Scratching his head, he asked the boys to recite the tables one by one. While the first boy was doing so, Makhana suddenly stood up.

"What thunderbolt has hit you now?"

Makhana lifted his little finger, " "Pass", sir."

"Oh "pass" indeed! Sit down at once or I'll thrash you."

Makhana sat down, but, after a few minutes stood up again, "Sir, Masterji, I'm bursting! Terrible "pass" sir!"

"No mischief before me! Or I'll draw it out through your bottom!"

"Sir I'm telling the truth, Masterji. It is the big "pass", sir!"

Nilakanth looked Makhana square in the face. Makhana's eyes seemed to glitter with tears. He thought that he was telling the truth and so let him go. Once in the toilet, Makhana began to think—there certainly was something in the business of tying a knot in your shirt, or why else would he get the urge for the big "pass" all of a sudden? Hadn't he already relieved himself at home in the morning? Actually, the great Kali is not the one to leave her devotee in a tight situation—by the time he went back to the classroom, Nilakanth's period would be over.

The last bell rang at 4 p.m. Sula and Makhana left to go home. Reaching the main road, Sula would have continued to walk on, but Makhana stopped him with, "Wait. Let's stop for the Convent bus."

"To hell with it! We only get a beating later on." Makhana was quiet. Sula took his arm and pulled him along. But Makhana's feet refused to budge. Eventually Sula left on his own. He had taken only a couple of steps when he saw a few people gambling. He stopped to watch the game.

After a few minutes the Convent bus came. And out trotted the children in their shorts/shirts-socks-shoes-ties. After five or six children came the blue-eyed girl. Handing over the lunch box and attache case of books to her mother, she tightened her skirt belt. Makhana's heart pounded against his ribs as if the Headmaster had made him do eight runs of the school yard. As he was looking at her she disappeared with her mother in the *halwai's* alley.

The next day, school went well till the recess when suddenly the cry went round that two boys had drowned while bathing in the river near Habba Kadal. The bell at the end of the recess was rung late and the teachers had all the boys assemble in the compound and fall in line just as they did for prayers. After a while, the Headmaster came and delivered a lecture. The boys must not go to the *ghat* to bathe in the Veth because the river was infested with crocodiles; the crocodile is a riverine animal and resembles a lizard but is much bigger in size and as soon as a boy enters the Veth, its jaws close on his legs and he is dragged down; from the word "crocodile", came the phrase, "crocodile tears" . . . .

Meanwhile the Second Master came and proceeded to put the stamp of the school on every boy's thigh while the Headmaster spoke on: "The school stamp is being put on your thighs so that every morning we can examine it and if it is found missing or washed away from anyone's skin, he will be given a thrashing with stinging nettles."

When the Second Master was through with the task of stamping, the school was declared closed for the day.

As they were going home, Makhana said to Sula, "Supposing we tell them that we had a bath under the tap? How can they tell?"

"Stupid! Do you think they are fools? Don't they know there is no water in the taps? What wisdom will you show them then?"

Makhana pulled his shorts up and said, "Look, how well this brand of a slave suits us!"

"Aren't the legs of goats hanging at the butcher's shop stamped similarly?"

Reaching the main road, Makhana stopped, saying, "Today we were saved from Nilakanth the Crocodile's period."

"Oh yes."

"Did he ask you your tables?"

"No, I too was saved by the skin of my teeth."

"Swear by your father?"

"By my father's death I swear"

"How did you manage it?"

"He asked me to press his head."

For a while they were silent and then Makhana spoke, "The bus has not come today."

"How can it come yet? Weren't we let off early? Come, let's go."

"Let's wait, shall we?"

"No, tomorrow the Crocodile will certainly demand the tables."

Makhana had developed a certain faith in the efficacy of the shirt knot. So he replied carelessly, "Oh, come on. Tomorrow is a long way off."

Tomorrow came and went and so it went on for a long time. The Form Master was supposed to check the boys' cleanliness before the prayers every morning and he asked them to show him the stamp. It had gone in several cases and on some only a faint mark remained. But it was still fresh on Makhana's and Sula's thighs as if newly made. There were welts of grime around the mark, throwing it into greater relief. The Form Master understood that these two had followed the Headmaster's orders to the letter, while the others had had an occasional dip. He was very pleased with them, and letting them off, asked both of them to go to his house where a carpenter was at work.

Sula and Makhana went off enthusiastically. They were to keep handing the material—frames, planks, and nails to the carpenter as he worked, fill water in his *hookah*, tobacco in the *chillum*, place a live charcoal from the *kangri* on it and take puffs till the tobacco was properly lit. Carrying beams, Makhana's shirt got torn. Sula had been wise—he had taken his off and worked in his shorts.

At about 4 p.m., the two picked up their bundles of books and left to go home. At the main road, Makhana's feet automatically came to a halt. Sula gave a chuckle and stopped too. After a while the Convent bus came and the children descended. Today they were in their winter uniforms—black shoes, red socks, grey flannel trousers, grey sweaters, white shirts, red ties and dark cherry blazers. On their top left coat pockets was the school badge. Makhana strained his eyes but could not locate the blue-eyed girl.

"Come on, let's go. It is late and I am cold."

Makhana seemed to wake up at Sula's remark. He too was feeling cold and the two turned homewards.

After a month or so, the school closed for the winter vacation. When it reopened, there was still some snow around. Before the bell rang, the boys played and had snow fights. Sula and Makhana buried a number of boys in the snow and thrust snowballs through the shirt fronts of several others. Then they made three snowmen, resembling the Headmaster, Nilakanth and the Maulvi Saheb. In the bustle of the game, they came into their own and seemed to realise their worth for the first time. Hardly anyone escaped their attention. The high point of the morning was their dragging Ashok Kumar and Javed Ahmad of Class V on the snow. This thrilled them with an animal pleasure. Their happiness lasted till the fourth period. For the first two periods no one turned up to teach them. The third was Maulvi Saheb's. He demanded walnuts from the Shivratri festivities from the Pandit boys and forgot to check the work assigned for the long winter vacation. But the Second Master in the fourth period demanded work. The pallor of death spread on the faces of several boys. Makhana quickly tied a knot in his shirt. Sula did not have the lump of fat with him. He looked appealingly at the Second Master who made all the boys, including him and Makhana, who had not done the winter assignment, stand up. Then he beat the stove pipes with a stick and collecting the accumulated soot, smeared their faces with it. The Monitor was ordered to take them round all the classes. Makhana heaved a sigh of relief at having escaped a beating. Now he was fully convinced of the secret power of the shirt knot. As they went down the stairs, he told Sula, "Saw a film with my cousin on Shivratri. There was a black giant in it—just like you!"

"You should see your own face! You look like the devil himself!"

Led by the Monitor, they came to Class V first of all. Seeing them, the boys and the teacher burst into laughter, in which they also joined in sheepishly. Their next stop was Class IV which was being taught by Nilakanth, who boxed their ears. A few boys started to laugh but Sula gave them such a malevolent look that the smiles froze on their lips. After this the Monitor took them to Class II, which was being taught by the Maulvi Saheb at that time. He showered blows on some and obscenities on others. While giving Makhana a hard blow he admonished him, "Don't you dare forget to get the Shivratri walnuts tomorrow!"

In the Upper First, Makhana quietly pinched the arm of the Black Giant next to him and a cry escaped him, at which the Master gave him several hard slaps. In the Lower First, Sula upset a bottle of ink belonging to child sitting in the front row, but the child was too scared of him to even utter a whimper of protest. When they were back in their class after the round, the Second Master made them catch their ear lobes to express shame and with firm instructions to get their work with them tomorrow without fail, dismissed them.

Tomorrow went by, then another tomorrow and so it went on for the next five years. The name of the school was changed. It became the Government Lower Middle School. But it still had only five classes and Sula and Makhana still remained in Class IV. The warm autumn sun was very pleasant and these two had been put to work by the Maulvi

Saheb. Sula was scratching his back and haunches with his nails. Makhana was squeezing out the pus from the boils on his thighs. The Maulvi Saheb's eyes were half-closed with relief. The other boys were engaged in games of noughts and crosses played on slates. The Monitor stood at the door on the look out for the Headmaster. This was the last period and they were let off after this. Makhana bought a cigarette for one paisa from the shop outside the school and the two friends took turns taking puffs from it.

"Come on, hurry. Let's leave the books at home and play with marbles," Sula said.

"No, let's finish the cigarette first. On the main road someone might see us smoking."

"That's a lie, you rogue, if your father were alive, you would make him fill tobacco in your *chillum*, I'm certain. I know what's bugging you—you think it is too early for her to come!" Makhana just grinned. Finishing the cigarette, they walked to the main road. The Convent bus had arrived. The children descended and then left with their mothers. The bus left, but Makhana and Sula remained. Makhana asked Sula to buy two-paisa worth of roasted soyabeans. "There she comes!" Sula's exclamation made Makhana forget to munch. His heart beat faster as he stared at her unblinkingly. Reaching the *halwai's* shop, she dismounted her bicycle. Her attache case of books was on its carrier and in her hand she carried a hockey stick. She wore white socks and PT shoes. Her white skirt hemline reached just above her knees. Over her white shirt, she wore a red nylon cardigan. Her hair fell over her shoulders.

"How she has grown! How different she looks!" Sula nudged Makhana.

"Only her eyes are the same—as blue as ever," Makhana drew a deep sigh, "What a little girl she used to be!"

"How little? Just as little as we used to be. But they say she is to appear for her matriculation this year."

"Swear on your father?" Sula seemed to jump out of his skin.

"May my father die if I tell a lie," Makhana swore.

"This is what is called luck!"

"They say she is the captain of the school hockey team too."

Suddenly Sula thought of something. He asked, "Hey listen, didn't they take four annas from each of us for sports equipment last month? What did they do with the money?"

"Just look where this chap has gone!" Makhana was furious, "I'm talking of something serious and he is off on a totally different track—after all, what can one expect from him!"

Next year the name of the school changed again. Now it was the Nehru Memorial Government Lower Middle School.

Sula asked Makhana, "What does this Nehru Memorial mean?"

"Nehruji is dead, that is why our school has been named after him," Makhana answered his question.

"Oh that I understood very well but what does "Memorial" mean?"

"How the devil should I know?"

"To me it sounds like an obscenity."

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Makhana lost his temper, "I'll report you to the Headmaster—tell him that this fellow is abusing the leader of the Kashmiri Pandits."

"Oh ho! Did I abuse him on my own? They themselves have given this obscene name to the school."

"How does that bother you? You just keep your mouth shut."

After the prayers, the Headmaster made an announcement: the Maulvi Saheb was retiring from service that day; he would not be coming to school the next day. Then he spoke at length of his competence and gentle qualities. The boys understood nothing of it. The Headmaster then made a request for the Maulvi Saheb to say a few words of advice to the boys, at which he stepped forward and began, but broke down after just a few words. Taking a piece of cloth from his *sherwani* pocket, he wiped his tears. Placing the same cloth on his nose, he blew hard and drew the snot on it and rubbing the cloth between his fingers till it was absorbed, folded it afresh and put it back in his pocket.

While climbing the stairs of the class, Makhana asked Sula, "Hey, why did the Maulvi Saheb weep?"

"Shouldn't he weep? The poor man must be feeling bad about leaving his job," Sula said.

"Couldn't it be that he was sorry about beating us so much?"

"Maybe that is why, who knows."

"Anyway, good riddance! God has delivered us from him."

"Oh but will he who comes to replace him be any better for us? All these bastards are the same."

Maulvi Saheb came to Class IV as usual in his period. He was eloquent : "My dear boys, you will be very happy to see me gone. You must have a lot of resentment against me because I used to beat you, but remember a teacher's beating is not a beating, it is like being given food and nourishment. And this stick is not a stick, it is a giver of wisdom. I had no hatred for you—rather there was love for you all in my heart. That is why I liked to drill sense into you with this, my symbol of wisdom."

The boys listened in silence. He went on and on and finally concluded with, "All right, now I shall hit each one of you on the hand with this stick for the last time, so that you will always remember my love for you."

The Maulvi Saheb retired, but there was no immediate replacement for him. The next day, the Headmaster himself took their class. As his glance fell on Sula, he seemed to remember something, "Hey, you there. What's your name?"

"Sula, sir."

"All right, Sula, get up and go to my house. Do you know where I live?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Very well. Now listen, our servant went home to his village yesterday. Why don't you go and take our cow out, lead her to some garden." Sula rose with alacrity and asked, "Sir, shall I leave my books here or take them along?"

"No, no, take the books with you. At 4 o'clock you can go home from there. But wait. Take someone with you."

"I can take Makhana with me, sir."

"And who may Makhana be?"

"Me, sir," Makhana rose with a grin.

"Ah, that's very good. Run along then, both of you."

The two picked up their load of books and left. They went to the Headmaster's residence and drove the cow out, leading it to a distant field. The cow began to graze, her mouth clinging to the green grass, while the two started playing hop-scotch.

"Hey, did you see how fat the Headmaster's wife is?"

"Shouldn't she grow fat? With a cow at home, she must be drinking milk by the bucket every day!"

"They said the servant would be back after four days. Well, why should we mind? That is four days well taken care of! And if they ask us to write a composition on "Cow" in the examination, just think of it!"

"Oh yes. Look, this cow really has two ears, two eyes, four legs and one tail! Don't they also write, 'a cow chews cud?' What does that mean?"

"Maybe it is something to do with dung."

"Forget it. Besides, if the Headmaster is pleased with us, he will certainly pass us, composition or no composition," said Makhana.

"Tomorrow I'll get the marbles with me. There's no fun in this hop-scotch."

"Ah ha—that'll be fun." Makhana jumped with joy in anticipation.

On the fourth day, while playing with marbles, a sigh escaped Makhana and he said, "The Headmaster's wife said their servant would be returning from the village today."

"That means we shall have to attend school tomorrow?" Sula's knees became wobbly with dismay.

"Yes, what else?"

"But let us loaf tomorrow too. We shall tell them at home that we have to take the Headmaster's cow out again."

"By father, now you are talking sense!" Makhana's spirits soared and he shouted, "Here—that's my turn!"

Tomorrow came and went and so it went on for another five years.

It was the 14th of November, Jawaharlal Nehru's birthday—Children's Day. Sula, Makhana and all the other boys of the Nehru Memorial Government Lower Middle School were taken to the stadium by the Masters. The huge stadium gate had been decorated with arches of flowers and bunting. Many cars and jeeps lined both sides of the road, which was sprinkled with water and lined with lime. Policemen moved around busily in their crisp, freshly laundered uniforms. The boys from the Nehru Memorial Government Lower Middle School were not allowed to enter from the impressive front gate. They were asked to come from the gate at the back. Sula and Makhana were dumbstruck at the sight inside. There were flags all around—red, blue, yellow, green, pink, purple—fluttering in the wind. On one side in chairs sat men in expensive suits and women in bright coloured dresses. In front of them in neat rows stood boys and girls from different schools in their distinctive, attractive uniforms. At the other end stood the band in dazzling attire. Their drums and bugles shone brilliantly in the sun.

Sula, Makhana and several other boys were made to sit in a corner at the back, far away from the colour and pageantry. They tried to sneak ahead quietly, but a Master happened to notice and swinging his thin mulberry stick, pushed them back. But Makhana kept rising on his haunches to catch a glimpse of the show, while Sula was happily engaged in a game of pebbles with another boy.

Suddenly all the people in chairs stood up. Someone announced something through a megaphone and the uniformed boys and girls stiffened to attention. Someone dressed in pure white arrived. Smiling, with folded hands, he bowed before everyone and took his seat on the sofa in the front. Sula quietly threw a pebble at Makhana.

"Now which bastard's father is dead?" Makhana was enraged. "Nobody's. It is I who threw it at you," Sula explained, "I say, who is that?"

"Must be someone. Who knows?"

"Is he the one who will give away the pears?"

"Who said anything about pears being given away?"

"Nilakanth was saying that we would each be given two pears over here."

"Swear by your father?" Makhana was pleased.

"By father I swear."

The man in white went to the rostrum and unfurled the flag. Everyone stood up. The children saluted and so did the band. The people took their seats again. The man in white began to say something.

"What is he saying?" Makhana asked Sula.

"Who the hell understands anything?" was Sula's reply.

After his speech, the man went back to his seat on the sofa. The people clapped. Watching them, Sula, Makhana and the others also clapped loudly. A little girl climbed up on the rostrum and sang a song. She was also cheered. Makhana and Sula too applauded. Then came four or five boys, who also said something and received loud cheers.

"Oh I'm feeling tired with all this clapping," said Sula.

"You get tired too easily," Makhana snapped at him, "these poor fellows are not tired with all this lecturing and you are exhausted merely with clapping!"

Next came a group of girls who performed the "roff". Then there was a mass drill by the uniformed children. At the end it was once again the man-in-white's turn. He climbed the rostrum again and began to give away the prizes to the boys and girls. Every recipient of a prize was cheered lustily.

"Hey, when will they give the pears?" Sula asked.

"How should I know? Maybe they give or maybe not," was Makhana's reply.

"Oh, but why won't they? When they could give prizes to these guys, why should they faint when it is our turn?"

"Obsessed with your stomach, as usual. One would think you were starving!"

"By God, I have eaten nothing this morning."

"Why, didn't you have tea?"

"When I left home they had not made it yet."

"O.K., be quiet. Look, another girl has received a prize. Clap for her, will you!"

"She won't find me wanting—ready to die for her," Sula clapped loudly.

At 11 o'clock the whole show was over. Sula and Makhana walked out and stood outside the stadium gate, while the vehicles moved out. The two friends counted, taking bites from a pear . . . .

"Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one . . . . ."

"To hell with it! What will we get with all this counting? It is just giving us a headache."

"Say, are there so many cars and jeeps in this city?"

"You think there are only these? There must be four times as many!"

"Swear by your father's death?"

"By my father's death I swear. To hell with them all! Didn't you say they would give us two pears each? Why have they given us only one?"

"How should I know? Maybe half the pears were carted home by the Masters."

"Hey, look! Did you see the people in that car?" Makhana almost screamed.

"No. Who was it?" Sula asked.

"That same blue-eyed one. Perhaps she had brought her daughter here in the car."

"Did she have her husband with her too?"

"Oh yes."

"Was he the one who used to have hair like silk and milk-white legs?" Sula sighed.

"Oh yes, the very same."

"How they have grown!"

"Shouldn't they have grown?"

"They have a child too!"

"Shouldn't they have had? It must be twenty-two or twenty-three years since then."

"Twenty-three years?"

"Certainly that. It is an age ago."

"Swear by your father?"

"I swear by my father."

"Why didn't we grow up?"

"How do I know? How can I say anything?"

"Do we have to go to school tomorrow?" Makhana asked after a while.

"What do you think? They have given you a holiday today—you expect them go give you one tomorrow too?"

"I just wondered if they might."

"Wondered if they might indeed! They—who would not even give us two pears!"

"So there is no getting away from school tomorrow?" Makhana sighed.

The next day, as the boys started to go to their classes after the prayers, Sula of Class IV said to Makhana: "Learnt the multiplication tables set by Nilakanth, have you?"

"No. You have?"

"Tried to, but just can't memorize the damn things."

"Now, what shall we do? Lord Yama's own messenger he is," Makhana's face turned pale.

Sula laughed carelessly and handed something to him stealthily, "Here, rub it on your hands, then the caning will not hurt."

"Swear by your father?" Makhana was somewhat incredulous.

"May my father die if it isn't the truth. Look, I am also applying it on my hands."

The Stranger Beside Me

Hirday Koul Bharati

Accidentally he received a push from me. Or maybe I received one from him—I cannot tell for sure because the crowd was so thick that it was hard to tell who was pushing whom. Everyone was waiting. Any moment now would see his arrival.

Such was their love for him that people had even forgotten to lock up their houses as they had rushed out. They were sure no one would rob them today.

I had secured a place for myself by arriving a day earlier. I knew well that, leave alone a place in the front row, it would be impossible to find even a foothold in this area on *the* day. But in spite of this, the crush of the crowd was such that I had been pushed far back from my original place. And now, when after a long period of milling around, the people had settled down, he received a push from me or maybe it was the other way round. The push travelled to the next one and from him to another and another till the vast packed crowd swayed as a paddy field does when a gust of wind bends it all the way from one end to another. "It is called a chain reaction," he said.

I shook my head in denial.

"Then what?" he asked.

"It is called restlessness," I replied.

"Yes," he said, as if to himself. And then he waited as though he was sure that I would elaborate further. But there was nothing I could share with a stranger. There is lots of noise in a crowd no doubt but no one has anything to say to anyone. As far as communication is concerned, it seems that one is alone and that within one lurks a dense, dark jungle.

"Who knows what decision must have been taken?" The anxiety in his words was not echoed in his tone. Perhaps he spoke just like that, to stretch the conversation. There was so much I could say but . . . to a stranger? Just to break this mind-set I replied, "It must be good. Coming from good people, the decision has to be good too." He glanced at me in such a way that suggested he did not quite trust my statement. No matter that I had indeed spoken without conviction, merely to lighten my own tension. The noise of the crowd remained, but there was no conversation. To everyone, the next person was a stranger.

All of a sudden the noise ceased—absolutely, as though a spell had been cast. I don't know how long this state lasted. Then the watermen came with their leather sacks, sprinkling water on the path leading to the podium. The only sound that broke the silence was the splash of water as it fell on the ground. The men left as they had come. Then came the carpets, long strips of red rolled out to the podium. The parts in shade were the colour of blood but the ones in the sun were like a slap of fire. After a while came the flower girls.

They covered the whole pavilion and the path with a thick carpet of flower petals. Heads bowed in salutation, they left, a picture of grace and courtesy.

"Now the Lord Nagrai*!" the stranger addressed me under his breath.

And that is what happened. First the nobility, the courtiers and ministers and then he himself. Whether he *was* Nagrai, no one could tell, but the first thing he did on arrival was to reject the old method of ascertaining class and authenticity through descent into a cauldron of milk. A proclamation was made: from now onwards any person having a mole on any part of his body or limb would not belong to our fraternity, he could not be "us". The absence of a mole alone would be our identification, the mark of our true breed, the stamp of our authenticity. A mole is a stain and a stain could never be . . . . ." He went on and on for a considerable period of time but no one heard the rest of the speech. As soon as the new method of recognising authenticity was announced, there was consternation—an uproar and a scramble for the exit. Some ran in one direction, some in the other. Stealthily I covered the mole on my cheek with my palm. But the stranger-beside-me, as though to console me, said, "Don't worry brother, come with me. There is a cure for everything." He took my arm and safely drew me away from the mêlée.

The mole was no longer a bright jewel—now it was a curse, a sin, a disease, a mark of untouchability, to remove which I was taken by the stranger-beside-me to indescribably clever practitioners of miraculous cures. Some of them tested my blood, others analysed the marrow in my bones and still others probed the formation of my flesh and bones. But from all of them the verdict was the same : there was no abnormality, the treatment of which would make the mole disappear. In desperation I asked why it could not be carved out of the flesh. Had not surgery made vast strides? Hearing my plea, the stranger-beside-me had me examined all over again. I was put through diagnostic machines, X-ray plates were taken, a fresh blood test done. All the reports were collected and fully debated upon. Eventually the head of the team of specialists addressed me, "No, my friend, it cannot be done. The mole cannot be carved out."

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* In Kashmir, there is a celebrated myth of the lovers Heemal and Nagrai. The latter was a *nag* (serpent) who took human form, fell in love with and married Heemal. His former *nag* queens, jealous of the new liaison, poisoned Heemal's ears against him and made her test his true nature by asking him to descend into a cauldron of milk, where he reverted to his real serpent nature. From this myth is borrowed the motif of 'real identity' which occurs in the story.

"But why?" I begged.

"Because its roots go very deep inside you. They are in your blood, in your inherent nature, your cultivated traits, your very genes, generation upon past generation." He went on, "Any attempt to remove it will change your complexion, your whole being, the very imprint of your face will be lost. You will be reduced to a shadow, why, a mere phantom!"

I was bitterly disappointed but even more disappointed was the stranger-beside-me. "Do not lose heart. After all there are still God-men who work miracles in the world," he tried to hold out hope. "They say a real holy man, who lives beyond the bounds of our reason, is in town—the cremation ground is his abode. His powers are most potent. He is said to have worked dramatic miracles."

I was brought before this great man. He looked at me and then glanced at the stranger-beside-me. Lifting his eyes to the heavens and scrutinising them for a while, he turned to me, "When the day comes for him to need my attention, don't you let him down. You are the one who should bring him here." Saying this he put his hand inside his sack and drew out a dark, black-as-death scorpion, immobile under his spell.

"This is the cure for your affliction," he said, while the scorpion rested on his palm.

"But what kind of cure is this?"

"This is the only cure. Just as a dose of asafoetida withers away the tree, the scorpion's venom will eat away this mole." With these words he lifted the scorpion and placed its two poisonous pincers upon the mole on my cheek. He broke the spell and the scorpion came alive. It began with tentatively probing the size of the mole, paused for a while and then swelled its poison sacs, drawing forth all the venom in its tail, steadied its fangs on the mole and shot it. It stung and stung, again and again, I don't know how many times. I fainted. When consciousness returned, the mole was gone! Withered away exactly as a tree is when fed upon the bitter resin asafoetida. But the poison! It ran through my veins, filled my blood, saturating the very root of my being. My body was suffused with pure venom but I was happy in the knowledge that the pain, no matter how agonising, was all hidden inside me; from my appearance no one could cast any doubt on my breed, identity or authenticity—I conformed perfectly.

Once again the crowds surged, hordes of people crushing, pressing one another from all directions. I had come to find a place for myself a day earlier. "Who knows what must have been decided?", once again the stranger next to me asked and I gave the same reply that I had on that earlier occasion.

Once again the watermen, followed by those who laid out the carpets and then the flower girls. Once again the stranger-beside-me spoke under his breath, "Now the Lord Nagrai!" And that is exactly how it was. Once again the procession of the nobility, courtiers and ministers and then he himself. Whether he was the Lord Nagrai or not is something no one can tell even now. As soon as he arrived, he rejected the old method of determining true breed through descent into a cauldron of milk, just as he had on that earlier occasion. The only difference was that this time the proclamation was: "From now onwards this is our identification: anyone who does not have a mole on his body, will not belong to our fraternity. He will not be "us". This alone will determine our identity, our authenticity, our true breed. A mole is a spot of beauty, a symbol of grace and one who is not beautiful . . . . ."

He went on but no one heard the rest because there was a stampede—people rushed out in all directions. The stranger-beside-me in deep disappointment.

"Do not worry my friend. There is a cure for everything," I said, and leading him by his hand, brought him before the holy man in the cremation ground. Once again the holy man drew out the spell-bound scorpion from the sack, broke the spell and placing it on his cheek, said to me, "I was afraid you would let him down. The cure for his affliction is the same." Just as before, the scorpion stung the same spot on his cheek again and again. The stranger-beside-me fell unconscious just as I had. When he regained consciousness there was a round, black spot where the scorpion had stung him, exactly like a mole.

In his case too the poison had spread through his veins, suffusing his whole being, but like me he too was happy in the knowledge that the pain, no matter how agonising, was well within him. From his appearance no one could doubt his breed or authenticity. Afterwards, he went his way and I mine. But he and I remain similar in one respect. There is venom in him and there is venom in me.

To Slavery Born

◆

Bansi 'Nirdosh'

This was the last day. After forty long years of slavery, Sansar Chand would be free. He had been beaten hollow. The pulp gone, only the shell remained. And he did not want the shell to receive any more batterings.

How he had waited for the day when his son, Kundanji, would get a job! That would mark the dawn of his own freedom. Unemployed for three years after graduation, Kundanji had finally found a job in the Accountant General's Office. Sansar Chand felt like a king. Joy overflowed from his heart as if his son had not just become a clerk but scaled some hitherto unconquered peak of glory. The day his son received the letter of appointment, he gave a month's notice to his employer, the city merchant. He would quit at the end of the month. God had heeded his prayer—his son had found employment with a salary of six hundred rupees. With his own pension of two hundred, it would add up to eight hundred, quite enough for the family of four : the old couple and their two sons. He had already married off his eldest child, a daughter, around the time of his retirement from Government service, six years ago. Since then he had been working at the shop along with the rest of us. He did not call it "work", he called it "servitude". Not that he had anything against private service. For him, life itself had been never-ending slavery. He would often say, "Look at me—a born slave! I began life as the Government's slave and now I am the Seth's slave. I was a drudge then and I am a drudge now—the yoke has never been lifted."

But now at last he was convinced that the days of his slavery had ended—his son had found a job and he had nothing to worry about any more!

Today was the last day of the month. Sansar Chand was happier than he had ever been in his life. His son Kundanji was bringing home his first pay packet—six hundred rupees. He himself had been paid four hundred by the Seth, and with his pension of two hundred, it too added up to 600. But the six hundred his son would bring home seemed an enormous sum to him—more like 6,000 or even 6,00,000! I cannot believe that he could have felt as elated at the sight of his own first pay as he did today at the thought of his son's. My own pay was not more than Sansar Chand's—just about four hundred but I felt rich—I could spend it just as I pleased. The house was run by my father and elder brother. Since I wasn't married yet, hardly any responsibilities burdened me. There was a world of difference between my situation and that of Sansar Chand. In spite of a hand-to-mouth existence, he had given his daughter not only a substantial dowry, but fulfilled every demand put forth by her in-laws. He had even got into debt to ensure her happiness.

In order to run his house, educate his two sons and feel somewhat secure economically, he had been forced to work for the Seth. But now, after years of running between pillar and post, appeasing God only knows how many devils, one of his sons had found employment. This was the moment Sansar Chand had been waiting for all these years, during which he must have told me at least seven thousand times, "Do you hear, Majid Bhai, the day Kundanji gets a job will be the day of my release—too long have I been nothing but somebody's slave!"

Sansar Chand was very good at his work. Our Seth had never got along with those of his employees who understood the business of accounting, but Sansar Chand had been able to win his trust. In spite of having become well acquainted with all his business dealings—black and white—he quietly followed all instructions, keeping the accounts without questioning Sethji's ethics. He would justify it thus: "The Seth is responsible for his own sins, I only follow orders. We just happen to be his employees, no better than slaves and therefore already serving a sentence of penal servitude. Aren't Want and Slavery punishment enough? How we cringe and bow before the Sales Tax and Income Tax Officers, begging them to overlook discrepancies—and that too not for our own sake, but only to provide comfort and cheer to the Seth—is this not a curse? Are we not serving a sentence rigorous enough? And what do we get for all this? Just four hundred rupees on the seventh of every month!"

But on the seventh of the month he would still touch his eyes with the four hundred rupee pay packet, kiss it and put it in his pocket, saying, "Majid Bhai, why don't you plead with your God to let my Kundanji find a job fast? And then I shall stretch my limbs and relax to my heart's content. I have never had a night's peaceful sleep, even after my retirement. First it used to be the fear of reaching the office late and annoying the Boss and now I keep awake with the worry that the shop must have opened—the

Seth must have left his home . . . . ."

I knew that tonight for the first time Sansar Chand would sleep through the night, in peace, in freedom. Now he was nobody's slave, I myself had no experience of working for the Government, but I agreed with Sansar Chand that private employment, particularly working for the Seth, was certainly worse than slavery, with any "rights" existing only in the imagination. The employee is not supposed to be an individual, his only identity lies in the fact that he belongs to the Seth, body and soul—not only he, but all his ancestors, his family, even his neighbourhood—all must consider themselves the bonded slaves of the Seth. Throughout the day he is subjected to all sorts of humiliations, forced to listen to remarks questioning his pedigree, character, ability—"Where the hell have you sprung from? Don't you have the least sense of how to deal with a customer? You eat enough for two or three, but your output? Zero! Which dumb *mohalla* bears you as its curse? Good for nothing! Fit for nothing at all!"

But to tell the truth, our Seth was not that bad. He did not ill-treat his employees all the time. He was a much travelled man and once or even twice every month, he would take a trip to Delhi, Bombay or Calcutta. He had a broader outlook than most others, but even then he thought nothing of putting the employees at his shop on domestic chores: collecting the ration, fetching the gas cylinder, escorting his children to school and back, paying his electricity and water bills. It was having to do these household errands for the Seth that I hated the most—it was like death. But the others at the shop did it willingly. Sansar Chand too. He used to say that once you become the Seth's servant how did it matter whether you worked at his shop or his house? If there was no work in the shop, he would extract it elsewhere.

It was winter, cold and frosty, a drab heavy atmosphere, under a brooding sky. The roads were puddles of snow and water; the bazaars empty like people's pockets. There was nothing fresh to be seen anywhere, no new face, hardly anything to distinguish one face from another. Their heads bound in helmet-like woollen caps, clad in thick *pherans* or coats and overcoats, everyone looked tired, weary, worn-out—just like Sansar Chand. But no, he looked different. For the past one month, Sansar Chand's face had acquired a glow—the month since his son Kundanji had got the job. In his son's job, he had seen mirrored the dreams of a secure, happy old age and now they were about to become a concrete reality. Today was his last day at the shop. My heart felt somewhat heavy. During the past few years a strange bond had been forged between the two of us. But at the same time, I was rather happy too: at last he was going to be free. How long could he have dragged his old body thus? For the past forty years it had been one long tale of drudgery. Surely he deserved rest. If his son did not provide it, who would?

Sansar Chand met all his fellow employees, bade them good-bye and left.

"Sansar Chandji, do keep in touch, and drop in occasionally, will you?", I said and walked with him upto the main road. God knows whether we would ever meet again, I wondered for a long time that night before I went to sleep.

Sansar Chand turned up at the shop as usual the next morning, creating a flutter of surprise among us all. He went up to the Seth straightaway and said, "Sir, I want to withdraw my notice."

All the employees were pleased—the Seth most of all. But I wasn't. Taking Sansar Chand aside, I asked, "But Sansar Chandji, you were going to rest and enjoy your leisure. Didn't you have to make up for all those forty years of toil? Didn't you say that you wanted freedom from this servitude? Then what happened? Didn't Kundanji get his pay?"

"Oh yes, he got it all right," the words seemed to be drawn from him with some effort.

"So then?"

"Well, he did get his pay. But before reaching home he had spent it all. On his clothes, shoes and other stuff. What he said was quite right though. In my selfishness it is I who had lost a sense of proportion."

"But what did he say?" I asked impatiently.

"He said that he also had his needs, his personal expenses, his own commitments and why couldn't the house run as it had all these years, without his pay?"

I found it hard to meet Sansar Chand's eyes. Shame suffused my whole being. I could hardly say a thing.

On the seventh of the month when I received my pay packet, I handed every paisa to my father. He could hardly believe his eyes—he almost collapsed at the sight of the money.

I Am Still Alive

◆

Nayeema Ahmad

Squatting in the middle of the road, she kept repeating her question to every passerby, "Where are you going?" Some would just look at her and ignore the question, others would begin to wonder: where indeed were they going? Still others would freeze in their tracks as if they could not comprehend the meaning of her question. She would keep an unflinching gaze on the frozen figures, occasionally laughing crazily. Her laughter did not make a difference to them. There were many among the passers-by who were in a tearing hurry. Not only were they unmindful of the surroundings but seemed to be unaware of their own selves too. Looking at them, it would appear as though chaos and anarchy had been let loose. Who could know who was looking for whom? Or who walked with whom? They were all adrift, cut off from one another, stumbling along, sightless, deaf.

I too was heading this way after a long, long time. My body felt like it had shrunk into a stiff, skeletal shape. It seemed as though some power had robbed me of my ability to think. I had been hurrying along for a long time but I too did not know where I was going. The soles of my feet were worn through—I could hardly walk. As I approached the road where she sat, she stood up and barred my way. When my eyes fell on her face, life seemed to return—there was a surge of vigour through my being—I could walk again. I thought to myself: "This is she—yes—the one in whose search I have been lost for so long." I was filled with an excitement—if only I could lay the whole burden of my being in her lap! Then I might live again. But she appeared even more frail and helpless than I was. How could she, who could barely carry her own weight, lift or support mine?

"Where are you going?" she asked, with a smile that lit her face. I could give her no reply as I myself did not know my destination. She gave me a look, full of such anger, as threatened to tear me to pieces. Quickly I spoke, "I? Where *I* am going? You ask me? No, you tell me." She heaved a deep sigh and tears began to roll down her face uncontrollably, "I have been telling you for such a long time—why are you still lost in this maze? Why didn't you ask the help of those you met before me?" the words tumbled out in one breath. "But I did . . . I asked everyone I met but they all misled me, removed all traces of the roads that had been laid out for me. I can do nothing any more—you are the one who must find out."

Her voice broke, "No, no"—"I was very weak. Whenever I asked them a question they mocked me. Knowing my powerlessness they shoved me aside. Then I ran away to a desert where there was plenty of drinking water but my thirst could not be quenched no matter how much I drank. There was something inside me, tormenting me—even cautioning me: you are lost."

She looked at me blankly, as though to convey that she did not think much of my story. Then she laughed, a mirthless, harsh laugh. I could not bear its jarring resonance. I felt it would choke me—unable to breathe, I would die. I begged her not to laugh like that—"it sears my innards—just tell me where I am supposed to go—that's all." Hearing my plea, tears poured like the monsoon rain from her eyes and she said, "I myself am lost, following you. I have no idea where I am going. That is why, sitting in the middle of the road, I ask all the passers-by—maybe, among them, there might be one who can show the way."

"What? Are you lost too?" I screamed.

"Yes, I am lost too, but only because I was searching for you. Oh, how I have tried and tried for you to find yourself so that I too could find my own lost self but you kept eluding me all the time. My youth was wasted away while I kept a watch in the hope that you might walk this way again. How did I know that you would still be wandering, lost in your old haunts?" She grew hysterical, began to pull and tear out her hair, her clothes. I quickly took her hand and held it in mine, and said, "What have you started now, here in this broad street? Look, everyone is watching us!" People started crowding around us, each one of them screaming and beating his chest. A sharp cry escaped her, "Why are you all mourning your individual losses? Why don't you all raise one collective cry?" The crowd was stunned into silence and each one began to look at the other. Suddenly, from the distance rose a cry of panic and everyone turned in that direction. A gaunt skeleton of an old man rose from a grave, his flesh pecked away by crows and vultures. A sudden thought came to me—this old man had been killed long ago. Now he was advancing towards us with his decayed, rotting body, framing these words, "Why did the crows and vultures feed upon my body?" At his question, the crowd melted. She too moved and came close to me, grabbed me and began to weep. The years had worn me out—I couldn't walk any more. But she kept pushing me, dragging and pulling as she ran, a throng of people trailing behind. Everyone ran, blindly, as though chased by armed marauders. I struggled to free myself, loosen her grip so that I could answer the old-man-from-the-grave. I looked back—he lay flat by the grave once again and crows and vultures fell upon him as before. As we entered the grim, frightful wilderness, her grip loosened, but now it was my turn to clutch her hand and say, "No, you can't leave me. How will I ever find my way back?" She came close and, her lips almost touching my ear, she whispered, "Look back—at all those people who were running after us!" I looked and saw all their bodies pasted on the road. Nothing moved. Everything was dead. Life had no meaning any more. An ominous silence gripped the scene. She sat down and leaned against a tree, with a deep sigh. I was about to do the same when my eye was drawn to all those two-dimensional bodies that lay plastered on the roads where thousands of vultures had gathered. "No . . . No . . . why should crows and vultures feed upon them!" She rested her head upon my shoulder and said, with a laugh, "Those you imagine to be dead, are alive. They are the people who are condemned to live for a thousand years." I knew she was right when I saw that the crows and vultures were not eating the flesh of these road-huggers but carefully filling their beaks with sand from the dunes and sprinkling it on them. I asked her, "Tell me: am I dead or alive?" She chuckled and said, "You are still alive because the dead ask no questions!"

I was reassured by this. Perhaps I too wanted to lie there in peace, while crows and vultures filled their beaks with sand from the dunes and gently sprinkled it over me, so that I too could live on for thousands of years.

A New Triangle

Rattan Lal Shant

I do not know whether this story of Ratni and Surendra qualifies to be called a love story but . . . . .

As they came out of the court, they were feeling light, unburdened. They walked together, stealing occasional glances at each other, like a couple in love who have just succeeded in winning their parents' approval and are desperate to find a secret place away from home and prying eyes where they can take each other in their arms, gratified at having surmounted all obstacles to happiness. Would you ever expect to see a newly divorced couple walk out together, just like friends? But they did.

Surendra stopped to buy a packet of cigarettes from a shop. Ratni automatically stopped too, waiting for him to join her. Surendra turned to the right and so did Ratni. They came to the biggest restaurant in that market and both of them stopped in their tracks. Surendra spoke first, "I'm longing for a cup of tea. If . . . ." Without a word Ratni went through the gate and up the front steps of the restaurant, as if she had been waiting for the suggestion. Of course she knew that this was Surendra's favourite haunt where he used to spend hours together in the company of his friends. Once, long ago, when she had expressed a desire to accompany him there, Surendra had silenced her with a sharp rebuke, "No woman from a respectable family goes there." The issue had snowballed into a quarrel serious enough to lead to Ratni running away to her parents' house.

They entered a cubicle. The waiter came and Ratni boldly spoke up, "I will give the order today," and before Surendra could react, proceeded to order a number of expensive items on the menu. Snatches of an English song could be heard.

Surendra took sips from his tea and watched Ratni's face, trying to read the expressions as they flitted across it, while she kept her eyes down. It was after years that the two of them were sitting like this, having tea together. During the past month in particular, they had been like two mad dogs, snarling and ready to bare their fangs and pounce on each other at the slightest provocation. Ratni would leave for school every morning, with instructions to Doonichand to attend to Surendra's needs. She showed hardly any interest in whether he ate anything or not. As for him, he would return late at night and fall upon his bed like an unclaimed corpse. Ratni would be gone for weeks together, staying at her parents' house and Surendra would often sleep at his friend's. Neither showed any concern for the other—the relationship of caring was over. Days would go by without even exchanging a look. Doonichand remained the only connecting link. It was he who would enquire from one about the other out of habit, but only receive a rebuff for his pains.

The waiter stood before them with a slight smile. Ratni turned to Surendra. Today his cheeks appeared pinker than usual. There was a slight shade on his chin—a trail left by the razor blade. She looked out of the window and searched for God knows what in the busy Amira Kadal square. One day in this very market square she had suddenly run into Surendra after a number of days. The Principal was with her and it was she who drew her attention to him walking in the distance. Surendra had come forward and greeted the Principal politely. As though with the right to do so, she had complained, "What have you done to our Ratniji, Professor saheb? She seems to grow thinner everyday."

He looked at Ratni, as though seeing her for the first time. Yes, Ratni did look altered—but then did he look any better? And who was bothered about him? The Principal went on, "Yours is such an ideal family and we refer to you two so often in school. How lucky you are, just the two of you. I mean when there are children, one loses ones comfort—the peaceful life is gone."

There were no children but still there was no comfort, nor any peace. The Principal left, and Surendra asked Ratni, "Where are you headed for? Rainawari or home?"

Ratni shrugged her shoulders, "Might even go home." The two took their seats in the bus. Neither spoke to the other. On arrival at home, both went into the bedroom. Doonichand brought tea, but noticing the scowls on their faces, said nothing and just slunk away. Ratni broke the silence, "I am sorry to have upset your plans—you had to come home because of my Principal."

The strain showed on Surendra's face as Ratni continued, "I know you are itching for a fight. My going off to Rainawari is a good excuse." Surendra went on sipping his tea quietly. After a while, he said, "I know your school is close to your parents' house, that is why you are there whenever it pleases you." Ratni stood up, "It is ages since I have seen you laugh. I know you feel confined because of me. Were I to be knocked off while commuting, you would find a happy release. Why do you turn dumb at home? Otherwise you are articulate enough." Surendra laughed. "This is an original line. Where is your usual refrain: 'Were I to die you'd be inconsolable in your grief and then you'd know my worth.' " Ratni, beginning to undress, retorted, "But of course, do you think anyone else is going to bother about you?" Surendra too got up to change, "I have told you once and for all that your abusing yourself does not matter to me in the least. You might find emotional relief through these antics but if you think it will upset or worry me, you have another think coming." Ratni retaliated with a dramatic, "And that you couldn't care less and that your heart is as hard as iron and your determination steely, isn't it?"

The servant came and stood before the door. Seeing him, Ratni snapped, "And what do you think you are doing there?" Doonichand, taken aback, replied feebly, "What should I cook, Madam?" Surendra answered, "Meat. I feel like having *biryani* today." Ratni addressed the servant, "There is no *ghee* in the house, *biryani* is out."

"Saheb brought some the other day when you were at Rainawari," the servant announced with a mischievous glint in his eye and left.

Surendra picked up the thread again, "Know nothing about my steely determination, do you? Want me to remind you of the time we were married?" This seemed to silence Ratni but then she said, "I am not interested in these old stories. How long will you stretch them? I have told you once and for all, you are a loner, just a loner—you were fine as long as you were single—you should never have married."

"If I had not, how could I have enjoyed the privilege of hearing your highly original curses and abuses?"

Ratni seemed to be saying to herself, "This is the price I must pay for being born as an Indian woman—and then to be a Kashmiri Pandit. How can I fight back? And why should he care? He will do just fine without me."

"Of course I will. You think I will cry and plead before you? Fall at your feet and beg, 'Oh please don't leave me . . . if you do, I shall kill myself.' "

Ratni's fingers froze over the blouse hook and her face turned red with anger. Gesticulating wildly, she shouted, "Whether you suffer or not is of no consequence to me. Do you hear? This is not the Ratni of seven years ago who used to agonise over her parents-in-laws' moods, torture herself waiting for her husband's return at midnight so that she too could put something into her mouth—I have gone through the furnace and become hard as nails."

"How long will you go on trading these worn-out phrases? They mean nothing," said Surendra, as he sat on his bed and picked up a book.

"And how long will *you* go on with your pseudo-psychoanalysis? Isn't that worn to a shred too?"

After finishing their quiet tea, they left the restaurant. The waiter waved to Surendra knowingly, as though wishing him luck with his new girl.

Surendra felt refreshed—now he was the sole master of his life. As they were leaving home this morning, there was no discussion of future plans—no decision regarding the division of their joint possessions, the house in which they were tenants, the household goods, the single servant. They just got ready and left as if they were going to a party or a wedding—headed straight for the Judge's chamber and were the first to get their divorce papers signed. Leaving the court, they walked together since no fixed plans had been made beforehand. Surendra turned homewards as they came out of the restaurant and Ratni followed mechanically. They did not take a bus and walked companionably as though relishing a rare experience. In the old days any excuse would have done to start bitter recriminations, each holding the other responsible for the dreary, meaningless life they were leading.

It was Surendra who was the first to rebel against his parents, dramatically returning all the engagement gifts sent by the parents of the girl chosen for him by his family, declaring his decision to marry Ratni instead. Ratni arrived on cue and the two walked out together, disappearing for two whole weeks. But when they returned, an anticlimax awaited them. In their absence, both their parents had come to terms with the situation and Surendra and Ratni were married like any other traditional Kashmiri Pandit couple. Within a few months, however, Surendra had an argument with his parents and declared that he could no longer live in a joint family. Far from protesting or creating a scene, his father handed some keys over to him, as if waiting for this, and said, "Here you are son. Lodgings have already been taken for you and advance rent paid for the month." This took the wind out of his sails but he bottled his resentment. Ratni was furious. They left for their new home. As they were going through the bazaar, someone passed a lascivious comment, "Seen such goods after a long time indeed. What a lucky dog!" But Surendra walked on as though deaf.

Once, in this very bazaar he had snatched the whip from a *tongawallah* who had dared to make a pass at Ratni. Furious, he had thrashed the man till the whip handle broke in his hand. And gloating over his victory, he had walked towards Ratni through the crowds like a hero, but found her in tears. Sobbing, she had protested, "Did you spare a thought for me caught in this mob, while you swaggered off to deal with the *tongawallah*? If your manliness could not tolerate an insult to me, why didn't you make arrangements for my safety while you went off to do your macho act?"

He went cold when he saw her torn blouse. Then and there he swore to himself, never, never, to take her out with him.

A New Triangle

Ratni seemed to be lost in thought. What could she be thinking of? Surendra felt sorry for her and thought: lodgings will have to be found for her first, then I can make my own arrangements.

For the past three months the two of them had been leading separate lives. Tensions had been rising for quite some time between them, though the decision to get divorced was taken rather suddenly.

Surendra had returned late as usual. Ratni had also just got back. She was changing when he entered the room and continued doing so without embarrassment. She was sure he would leave and have his tea in the drawing-room, as usual. But instead he put his arms around her and covered her with kisses. She stood stiff, icily cold.

"Which film have you just seen?"

"I am hardly doing what they do in films."

"You couldn't have had your fix for some time, how do you hope to get it here?" She pushed him away and began to dress. Enraged, he screamed, "What else are you capable of giving?" And then he muttered to himself, "but you do not even have that. I don't know why I am tempted . . . you are worth nothing," he breathed hard.

Ratni burst into a mocking laughter. Fully dressed, she stood before him, perfectly in control, and said, "This is your real face. You must be seeing it all the time, but thank God, I too have seen it now."

Coming to bed that night Surendra said, "Ratni, what is it that still holds us together?"

Ratni seemed to be prepared for the question and, removing the quilt from her face, answered, "Nothing." "Then why this pretence of closeness and intimacy? Do you feel this widening gulf between us?"

"Don't you feel it too? To put it bluntly, we have grown too far apart."

"Yes, why should we be afraid of facing the truth?"

first she ignored the lock on the door of the other room, then one day casually inquired from Doonichand. He too was at a loss.

Returning on the fourth day, Surendra went straight to his room. He had hardly sat down when Ratni came in and stood before him. He shook his head, "No, no, this won't do—you can't demand any explanations from me."

"You are getting me quite wrong. I have come for an entirely different purpose. I want to borrow fifty rupees till the first."

Surendra gave her the money, calling out to Doonichand. "I have brought some mincemeat. Cook it, will you?"

As she left the room, Ratni said, "I suggest, let it be till tomorrow. There's lots of stuff cooked already. I mean we can both pay for it tomorrow." Surendra took out a bottle of liquor from his bag and sat cross-legged on his bed. Doonichand, who knew the signs well, brought a plate full of fried mutton and placed it before him.

After a while, Ratni came back. "Can't we live like friends? I mean in a civilised way?"

Surendra's eyes had grown heavy-lidded and had red streaks in them. He replied, "Why, haven't you been able to find other lodgings?"

"That is not the point. I mean I can't bear to watch you drink like this."

"Who asked you to watch? You are the one who has invited herself in."

Ratni grabbed the bottle and put it away in the cupboard.

Surendra did not have the heart to go to the cupboard and retrieve his bottle after she left.

The days flew by. The occasions when they met were few: either while checking the accounts with Doonichand or while going in or out of the bathroom. It they met in the lobby, they would sometimes comment on college or school news. That was all.

One day Surendra suddenly realised that he had not seen Ratni leave her room at all for the last few days. He also saw a few women coming and going—all of them her colleagues. Doonichand revealed that Ratni was ill. He went to her room immediately after his return from college. She did not look well at all. Her body seemed bloated. Doonichand had already called a doctor and bought the medicines. Surendra stood near the bookshelf. He did not go too close to her. Turning the leaves of a book, he said, "Did you show the doctor last year's test reports and hospital note?"

"The doctor knows everything—there is no need to show him old prescriptions and reports. What is happening now—today, is what matters."

Surendra, silenced by this, stared at her face, her colourless, almost lifeless face.

"But as a friend I surely have the right to enquire whether you have any money?" and not waiting for an answer, he called Doonichand and handing him some money for the purchase of fruit and some other things, left the room without a backward glance.

But he found no peace in his room. He had never seen Ratni looking so pulled down before.

But he would not let himself go soft, brooding upon how Ratni used to look before marriage. With a firm shake of his head, he went to bed.

Two more months went by. Neither did Surendra shift from the house, nor Ratni look for another place.

One day Doonichand asked for and was given a month's leave. On her return from school, Ratni made tea for herself. Seeing that Surendra was back too, she made him a cup. He was engrossed in a book and took the cup, unaware of who had brought it to him. Ratni was pleased and stood there watching him for quite some time. Then she snatched the book from him and said, "Better have your tea first, sir."

Surendra rose with a start, "You made the tea? Why? Oh of course, Doonichand is on leave." Ratni laughed and went into the kitchen to cook. After a while, she came back and said, "Will you lend me a hand? Like old times?"

"What do you mean 'like old times.' Today, we must talk about today."

"Even a neighbour can be asked for help, sometimes." She went back to the kitchen, her loosened hair swinging seductively. The sari *pallav* had slipped from her shoulder. Surendra's heart began to beat fast. He stole into the kitchen and suddenly planted a kiss on her neck. Ratni stood still, did not even turn her head, but her ears were red. Surendra, furious with himself, stamped out, regretting his impulsive action. He wondered why he had done that. Why had he lost his self-control? Shortly after, Ratni came into the room, head bowed and put her arms around him. Surendra started guiltily and tried to pull himself free but Ratni's grip did not loosen. She whispered, "I have bolted the door."

"What about the windows?" Surendra could hardly speak. He felt like a shy new bride.

It is four years since the divorce papers were signed. Doonichand's health has improved considerably in this period.

As I said earlier, It is hard to tell whether this story of Surendra and Ratni can really be called a love story. Aren't there supposed to be three angles to a love story? This one has only two.

The Voice

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Ghulam Rasool 'Santosh'

The killing was not accidental. It was pre-meditated, carefully planned before being carried out. The victim's death had been pronounced at the very moment of his birth. The killer knew very well that every living thing, once born, must die. When Karima first heard the voice pronouncing an untimely death, as he watched the youthful figure lying by his side, unmindful of the world, he dismissed it as a fearful delusion.

Karima had found him one morning under the shade of the grapevine creeper in the yard. He was not startled, nor felt any surprise at all at seeing the new-born baby lying there unclaimed, motherless. He himself had been a foundling lying by the riverside in similar circumstances, another Karima had chanced upon him, brought him up, and suddenly abandoned him one day in the forest without a word of explanation. In vain he had waited for his return, but then giving up hope, he had made himself a part of the environment. With the passage of time, even the memory of his adoptive father faded away. But sometimes his heart would contract with a strange ache, the origin of which he could not understand.

Karima picked up the foundling and hugged him tight. In the absence of a mother's breast he pushed a goat's udder into his mouth and the baby sucked contentedly. A cow and a goat took turns suckling him and Karima nursed him like a mother. While he worked on the little patch of land, the baby, cradled in a blanket, would hang from the grapevine, one end of a rope tied to the cradle and another to Karima's waist, rocking as he worked. When he went to the forest to chop wood, he carried the baby on his back, tied securely in a blanket. Even when he went fishing, he would still be clinging to him, tied to his back.

Before the child came into his life, most of his time was spent among the nearby hills and woods. For hours, he would lie flat upon the smooth rock that lay poised at the edge of a precipice, watching the mountain stream hurtling down over boulders and crags in all its youthful energy. The enchantment in his surroundings was enough company for him. While the herd grazed, he would listen to the song of the wind, transported with joy. Observing the wild animals in their haunts from his secret vantage point, was a favourite pastime. Sometimes, driven by dire need, he did have to hunt them, but he never took any delight in it. In fact he would feel quite depressed and not be himself for a number of days afterwards, lost in contemplation—thoughts he could not comprehend, analyse or resolve satisfactorily. Confusing images would crowd his mind when the whole terrain was buried under snow. He would sit on the threshold of his hut, leaning against the door jamb, watching the snow cover the hills. Staring at the *deodar* and *chir* forests enveloped in thick fog, his eyes would also grow misty. While he seemed to be scouring the scene, searching for familiar spots under the level sea of whiteness, his mind would be caught in the coils of its own making, unable to plumb its depths.

For six or seven years, the child was the centre of Karima's thoughts and feelings. Just as he had lost himself in his natural habitat earlier, now he was not conscious of anything but the child and its needs. By the time the boy was twelve years old, he had learnt to cook, gather wood from the forest, catch fish in the stream as skilfully as Karima himself. Driving the herd to graze in the pastures had made him well acquainted with every nook and corner of the paths and hills. Karima began to spend most of his time at home. He did work on his little plot of land, but here too he was joined by his son. The grapevine, however, neither drew Karima's attention, nor claimed his son's interest. Day by day it withered and wasted away.

The father and son ate their morning meal together. After cooking the mid-day meal, the son would pack his share of it in a cloth, and suspending the axe on his shoulder, leave, Karima's eyes following him all the way as he disappeared into the depths of the woods. In fact Karima's eyes would be searching for their own sights while scouring the distances. Gradually he would acquire a glazed look and seem to turn into stone, rooted to the spot, unfeeling, unseeing, dead.

Once, when Karima asked the boy to go and hunt, he gave him a strange look and said, "Every living thing has a right to life." It was then that Karima understood why a feeling of depression overcame him every time he killed an animal. In spite of his aversion, he would still bring home a wild creature or two every evening. Karima wanted to ask him, if every living thing had a right to life, why his own rights and his space were being taken away from him. But he could never bring himself to say it. Under the influence of a strange power he would find himself tongue-tied.

And then he began to hear the voice with an increasing frequency. Its pronouncement of death maddened him. He would mumble in his sleep, run out of the hut, shout and scream in the wilderness. The terror of death would fill his mind, his breath sounding like bellows. Raging like a lion, he would rush into the forest with his axe slung upon his shoulder. In this state he would cut down tree after tree with just one blow of his axe. The birds whose song used to delight him once upon a time, would become the target of his stones as they flew in the air. Ruthlessly he would pull out the rocks against which he had rested so often, chase the wild animals with his axe raised menacingly, dash the newly caught fish against stones and then, falling down exhausted, cry his heart out. Plunging his hands into the river, he would splash water from his cupped hands skywards. Finally he would fall down somewhere as if he were dead. But again the voice would rouse him and the madness grip him all over again, making him stumble blindly homewards.

He could never tell when it would be heard. Nowhere was he free from its resonance. There was no strength left in him any more. Leaning against the grapevine, he would stare unseeingly, muttering to himself. He could feel his own self shrinking into an echo of death. He had come to believe in the prediction of sudden death and knew that he could do nothing to avert it. He just waited for the inevitable to happen. Sometimes the vine behind him would seem to tremble without any reason. At first he thought it was the weight of his back that shook it, but when it continued to quiver and throb with a regular beat, he understood that the voice of death had entered the vine, announcing its close presence. At times he would feel like tearing it down with one powerful blow of his axe, but always the image of the new-born infant lying under its shade, would rise before his eyes and he could do nothing but collapse like a dead log. How he wished he could wipe his mind clean of all memory, but his own self was the hardest to forget.

The meaning of the voice was finally revealed on the night of the full moon at the end of the eighteenth year: the boy was to die and he was to be the executioner. A profound darkness engulfed him and the world grew deafeningly silent. He seemed to be hurtling down unfathomable depths. He screamed soundlessly and found his son trying to wake him up. He stared at him with a glazed look. The resonance of the voice spread through his being like molten lead. He seemed to have become a raging flame threatening to consume his whole environment. Like a flash of lightning he rose and poured a potful of cold water on himself. His son stood before him, petrified with fear, eyes held in the gimlet grip of Karima's.

It was the last night of the eighteenth year. Only a few moments stood between life and death. How utterly helpless he was! In spite of himself, he was ready to become the instrument of his son's death. The son whom he had cradled in his arms and given the warmth of his hearth had now been pushed out into the frosty night to freeze to death or die of hunger. He had forced him out during a violent thunderstorm, hoping that lightning or the flooded river would do the deed. But death, natural death, refused to touch him despite the opportunities he offered it.

That was when he made his plans. He asked him to accompany him to the rock overlooking a precipice where they used to share their mid-day meal sometimes. He thought he would give him a push to send him down the heights. But the raised hand seemed to freeze in space, immobile. Again, while chopping the wood he raised his axe in the air to bring it down upon him, but it too hung motionless. Then he just gave up in utter helplessness and dejection.

His heart continued to beat and he kept breathing, but his mind was a vacuum, devoid of all thought or feeling. He just lay corpse-like, on the mound. Suddenly the atmosphere was filled with the roar of the voice of death. It echoed from all sides, the words clearly ringing out, "Karima! you must do what you have to do—there is no escape from your *karma.*" He rose in terror. The vine was trembling violently. The voice echoed from his hut. He rushed in. His son was frying the fish he had caught. Karima's eyes were drawn to the knife lying alongside. His hand, controlled by an invincible power, reached out and picked it up. He came out of the hut. It was night. He had been called in to eat, but he did not move. His son came out and found him sharpening the knife. Feeling the familiar touch of his hand upon his shoulder, Karima looked up and saw the youthful form in its prime. For a moment he felt a pang. His eyes clouded with emotion. He took his son's hand and together they went into the hut. Hot rice, *hak* and fried fish were laid out on the rush mat on the floor. The two sat down, facing each other. He wanted to feed his son with his own hand, just as he used to do when he was a child. But today it was the son who fed them.

It was dawn. His son was in deep sleep, limbs relaxed, at peace. The lamp at his head was almost extinguished. Karima bent low and kissed his forehead. Had it been up to him, he would have nourished him to the last drop of his blood! The boy awoke, stretched his limbs fully, yawned and said, "The most marvellous sleep I enjoyed in all my life." Without another word, he bounded out of the hut, running gaily towards the river.

Karima saw him return, just as the first ray of the sun touched the grapevine. He stopped under it. Instead of going in to prepare tea, he stood at the spot where Karima had found him eighteen years ago. Knife in hand, Karima advanced, while he just watched, smiling. Before Karima could push him, he lay down of his own will. For a moment the youth seemed to have become the infant of long ago. Karima closed his eyes, bringing the knife to his throat. For an eternity his hand seemed frozen in the air. He opened his eyes—the boy was still smiling, his eyes focused on the father. The head was severed from the body, but the glazed eyes were still fixed upon him. The grapevine was shaking violently. Flocks of birds hovered overhead, setting off a noisy alarm. Howls of wild animals rose from the forests and filled the air. The clamour of the river was startlingly clear. The doors and windows of the hut rattled loudly. Thrusting the knife into the grapevine, he went in, helped himself to the leftover food from the last night's meal and ate it on his familiar perch on the mound. After washing his hands with the water from the earthenware pot, he fell asleep. He slept on for countless days and nights, getting up occasionally only for a drink of water. When the water in the pot was exhausted, he went back to the grapevine. It was green again; luscious fruit hung upon it in rich abundance—purple and taut with juice. He would take a bunch, eat it and go back to sleep. When there was just one last bunch left, his eye fell upon the skeleton underneath. Gathering some dry wood, he lit a fire upon his mound and burnt the bones one by one and then ground them fine in the millstone which stood near the door of the hut. The bone and wood ash mixed together. He took off all his clothes and smeared his naked body with the ashes and sat down under the grapevine in a *samadhi.*

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The Boy is Guilty

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Nazir Jehangir

A cry went round the bus—"Poor thing!" They saw that the boy had fainted. The passengers had the bus stopped and carried him out. One rubbed the soles of his feet, another pressed his hands, a third held his head on his lap, while a fourth fanned him with his handkerchief. Someone fetched water and another sprinkled it on his face. With all this attention, the boy regained consciousness and sat up slowly. The crowd of passengers was well pleased.

One of them enquired, "What happened?" Another asked, "Is this the first time you have fainted or does it happen often?" A third was telling his fellow passengers, "The bus was really overcrowded. The poor fellow must have suffocated. This pushing and jostling is enough to make even a robust fellow faint." Nearby, another was asking the boy, "You don't suffer from epilepsy, God forbid?" At this, tears welled up in the boy's eyes and he pouted, his lower lip thrust far out. Exposing his inner coat pocket to the crowd, he said, "My pocket, sirs, has been picked." Astonished, they examined the pocket. The coat, pulled in all directions by solicitous people, was soon in shreds. One, drawing a conclusion after his examination, pronounced, "This pocket, my dear sirs, has been slit with a pair of scissors."

Another immediately disagreed, "No, sir, it is clearly the work of a blade."

"Better listen to me, sir, scissors, no doubt about it." The man added sarcastically, "Pray where are the frayed edges a blade would have left?"

"Not necessary at all," the other insisted. "This cut, begging your pardon, is in a straight line, and that can only be achieved with a blade. Had it been scissors my dear sir, there would have been a certain amount of curvature in it, which I am afraid, there is not."

Not to be silenced by this, the first man persisted in his view of the matter. By this time both the opponents had gathered a sizeable number of supporters for their different theories. And now both the sides advanced reasons and arguments in support of their stance and a fierce debate ensued, with the passengers divided into two camps : Scissors versus Blade. In the midst of the argument, the Scissors-man raised his voice, "You are so uncouth. Your belligerence is no proof of the soundness of your argument." As a result, the Blade-man lost his temper and shouted, "You have no manners at all. After all, what can one expect from someone with such lowly origins as you!"

The debate grew more heated, arguments multiplied, the issue snow-balled into a full-blown quarrel. The quarrel did not remain confined to the protagonists alone but drew both the camps into it. Eventually the Scissors-camp formed a committee, while the Blade-camp quickly constituted a party.

Both the parties held their separate meetings. Allegations were hurled freely and motives attributed. The Blade-man referred to the Scissors-party thus : "These are the people who have always betrayed the nation. They filled their own coffers, fattened themselves and strangled the common man. We demand that they render an account of all their doings. And we categorically state here and now that if any attempt is made to tamper with the sanctity of Article 370, rivers of blood will flow. We will never allow it!"

The crowd applauded in full agreement and the Blade-man went on and on . . . .

Not to be outdone, the Scissors-man was expressing similar sentiments in a lecture to his supporters. While this was going on, emotions were roused and a fight broke out between the two groups. Stones were hurled and several people were hurt, some of them seriously. The police came, burst tear-gas shells and made a *lathi*-charge. Finally they had to resort to firing.

The road was clear of people. There was total silence all around, the bus far in the distance. The boy had been arrested on the charge of having started a riot.

The Second Meeting

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Akhtar Mohi-ud-din

It is not something that one should talk about. Not that it has no significance, but that if she gets to know of it, her heart will break and she will weep and lament as to why Time should exist at all.

When I met her for the first time, the air was heavy with the scent of honeysuckle and against a clear sky appeared a rainbow. The moment was such that it is hard to find a parallel to describe its beauty. There was magic in her eyes. I don't know what they mean when they talk about the magic of Bengal but if it has a quality of mystery about it, then it certainly lay in her eyes. I was fascinated—a snake caught in the charmer's spell. My eyes were fixed on her lotus face. Her voice was sweet. When she spoke, it wasn't merely her lips that moved—she communicated with her hands, her head, her shoulders, her whole being. Suffused with the sweetness of her voice, her body-language enhanced her beauty and combined with her beauty, her words sounded even more sweet. Were she to hum a song, it would seem as though far in a rich forest, a poignant pipe, still unfashioned, had found its voice sustained by the hope that the Eternal Maker would come and pierce holes in its breast and turn it into a sieve of melody.

Her height was just right. How much is "just right"? As much as the Eternal Beloved's should be. The form and texture of her dress was the stuff of those childhood fantasies built around the romantic tales of old kings and queens. She came from the land of fairies and of course she was a fairy herself.

When we met for the first time, we did exchange some words with each other. But what did we talk about? I do not remember any of it. I only know that I was hearing something that I had been waiting to hear since coming into the world. I had seen a revelation of my own self. There was consent on every side. Fear and doubt had been reduced to ashes, burnt down like the effigy of Ravana. Uncertainty and mistrust were dead. Mere daylight had transformed itself into radiance. Yes, the light had turned into radiance.

The job of a guide is to escort a visitor to different places, to acquaint him with the importance of each place, the special significance of each landmark. She must also have done all this as part of her job. But I remember nothing of that. I only know that each spot and landmark was special and significant only because it had been a witness to our meetings—that was all. She sang and I listened. The charm with which she murmured, "I am sorry" and the smile that accompanied it! All these and other sweet nothings that passed between us—the special landmarks and important places of her country were witness to them all.

But today the sun which contained all the variegated colours in its light, is snuffed out. Today—when under the onslaught of fear and mistrust, Man is being reduced to a trembling, frightened pigeon, when I happened to visit that country again, I met her for the second time. It was the apocalypse (Oh God, why was I alive to see the doomsday?). The values that have retained their pristine glory through generations and have become a very part of one's soul, the dreams that are a product of a lifetime's weaving . . . when the idols of those beliefs, the world of those dreams lies shattered, scattered in a sudden disruptive wind—what will you call it, glory or doom?

Time, the master-craftsman is always at work. If he wants to create he may produce an eternally fresh blaze of colour but when be wants to destroy, the solid tree in a distant forest will turn hollow, a lightning-struck skeleton, rotten and repulsive.

Today, when I arrived there for the second time, she did not recognise me, but I did. Her hair looked the same, but today its glow owed itself to henna. The attempt to spin the old magic with her glances was still there, but dusty cobwebs seemed to hang limp upon her lashes, dull, monstrous. There was the hint of a squint too. It seemed that in the murky fluid of her eyes flashed the images of countless sins and misdeeds which refused to be denied. Her face did have colour, a film of powder and rouge, but where was that natural lustre which had then shone like the vibrant colours of a rainbow? I recognised her and in the recesses of my heart a smouldering fire began to rage: why did I have to come here? I should have died in the intoxication of that first heady wine I had drunk when I came here first—that was heaven.

She did not recognise me at all. How many changes must have been wrought in my face and appearance by Time, the master-craftsman!

Even now I would get up in the morning, dress as usual and satisfy myself that I continued to be just as I had always been. The occasional toothache, knee-pain or back-strain and other such ailments had always seemed temporary aberrations. And as soon as cured, I thought myself as fit as I had been before. But today it dawned on me that I was wrong. The fact was that Time had left its indelible mark on each and every part of me. And therefore, I was not the person I was that day when the two of us had met for the first time behind the shade of the Hill of Fairies! My palace of ice cracked and crumbled into pieces in a moment, and that certainly is not a matter of little significance. I was old—so old that my beloved of yesteryear did not recognise me!

Today was the last day of my visit. Today, courtesy and convention demanded that I speak in an emotion-choked voice of how fortunate it was that I had the opportunity to visit this country and how our meeting was the high-point, the most precious, the most cherished part of my life, the only thing that gave it meaning. Today I was supposed to utter eloquent praises of her beauty, shower hyperbole on her qualities and say to her that she was the only person I would miss and think of on my return home. I had expressed these sentiments at the end of my first visit too, but at that time courtesy and convention had had nothing to do with it. They had come from the bottom of my heart—the sentiments had burst out artlessly, spontaneously, even to the point of tears.

But today—when she brought her autograph book before me, I said something I should never have, before saying which I should have died. I said, "I have put my signature on it before—twenty years ago, on the occasion of my first visit to your country."

She stood still at these words. Her eyes betrayed nothing. All that was written on her face was wiped out, as though her dark secret was out and she had been caught red-handed. She gave me a frightened look. I should not have done what I did. I turned the leaves of the autograph book. Lots of things had been inscribed in it by lots of visitors. I found my own composition. I blushed as I read the superlatives I had chosen to describe her qualities and her beauty. Her embarrassment was no less.

The Grave Robber

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Amin Kamil

People do not believe in such things anymore because nothing like this happens around them. But that does not mean that this strange event could never have occurred in Zajipather. Besides, Zajipather has not vanished from the earth. Even now we can see the ruins of the habitation that flourished there a long time ago.

They say that it was a happy and prosperous place till one day, a young man died. He was the only son, in fact the sole breadwinner for an old lady known as Saladed. She went mad with grief. They say that when this son of hers was being laid into his grave, she, weeping bitterly, said, "You should have been doing this for me, my son, but instead you have made me do it for you." While uttering these words she had fallen unconscious.

Her plight moved the people much more than her son's death had, the reason being that now the poor woman had no one left except God. They revived her with a drink of water and took her back to her hovel. Through the day her neighbours took turns bringing her tea and food. Some of them stayed with her till late in the evening, trying to comfort her. But after all, people have their own business to attend to, so ultimately all of them went back to their respective homes.

After their departure, Saladed fluttered from one window to another like a bird bereft of wings. But nothing seemed to comfort her. She went towards the graveyard with the intention of giving vent to her grief by wailing over her son's grave. The hour being late, people were already asleep. It was so dark that it was hard to keep track of oneself.

The graveyard lay far at the other end of the old lady's *mohalla*. Beyond the graveyard was another *mohalla* which was known as Surapore. In fact it was the graveyard which separated one *mohalla* of Zajipather from the other.

Saladed reached the graveyard. Meanwhile the moon was rising from behind the hill and there was a thinnish ray of light. As Saladed approached her son's grave, she noticed a human shadow crouching near it. She froze in her tracks. Who could be hovering around a grave in the middle of the night? Her heart began to beat fast and her eyes stared fixedly at the form. She took a few steps backwards without realising what she was doing. She could not restrain herself and shouted, "Who is that meddling around the grave?" Saladed saw the shadow freeze on the spot but then suddenly kneel down and, picking something up from the ground, dash out of the graveyard. At first she was too scared to move but then took rapid steps towards her son's grave. She found it partially open. She screamed out, "Is there no one around? What horror is it that haunts the graveyard?"

The people of her *mohalla* and those in Surapore heard the scream even in their sleep. Rushing out of their homes hurriedly, they stumbled along, drawn towards the cry. Saladed gasped out the details of what she had just seen. People went to the head of the half-open grave and reluctantly taking courage, peered inside to see whether her son's body was still there or not. It was, no doubt, but it was stark naked, stripped of its shroud. Everyone was stunned. Who had opened the grave and where was the shroud?

"My brain tells me," one of them began, "It must have been a hyena. In the pitch dark Saladed mistook it for a human being."

"What nonsense!" another contradicted him. "A hyena would have pulled the corpse out and eaten it up, wild beast as it is. But the corpse is whole and intact—it is the shroud alone that has disappeared."

"It is all clear to me—the devil has taken possession of someone," a third seemed to have hit at the truth. "Some cursed wretch has taken to stealing shrouds."

A shroud robber! Suddenly their palms were wet with perspiration. They stared at one another, dumbly, stupidly.

"The fellow must be found," one of them said angrily. "But who can it be? Mercy upon us!"

"Merely finding the person is not enough. A rascal like that needs to be lynched—burnt alive."

"Oh, but what do we do about him?" one thought of the corpse, "Hasn't he to be given a fresh bath and a shroud or is he to remain just as he is and the grave sealed?"

"If you ask me, I suggest we take him out and give him a proper burial once again," an old man suggested. "It is just not proper to send a man in a state of nakedness before God."

"Oh no, please, let him be. Just close up the grave," Saladed begged. "Leave it to God to decide in his own way."

The matter rested there and the grave was sealed. Meanwhile the night was over and a cock's crow announced the dawn. Everyone returned home, afraid, horrified, cursing the shroud robber, sending him to the seventh circle of hell.

Throughout the day, this was the topic in Zajipather—everyone was pale with fear, trying to read each other's faces to discover the culprit. Gradually the subject became a source of irritation, quarrels and disputes. Whoever was being questioned would lose his cool—"Do you think I am the culprit?" The issue began to turn relationships between neighbours and friends sour and then people began to ask themselves, "Why am I getting involved in this unpleasant business, spoiling my relationship with people?"

During the search for the shroud robber, two things happened. One was that Saladed lost her reason the day after the incident. The second thing that happened was that another corpse fell prey to the depredations of the shroud robber. Though the dead man's heirs had suspected something when they visited his grave the day after the burial, it was upon the neighbours' insistence that the grave was opened. The body inside the grave was really naked. The robber had sealed the grave in a haphazard manner after having done his job.

People went on cursing the shroud robber and consigning him to hell and on his part, the shroud robber continued unwrapping shrouds from the dead and wiping off his traces, leaving the graves looking neat once again. This came to be accepted as the done thing. The deed no longer aroused fear or anger in anybody because it was something they had seen and heard for the past twenty years. However, after each burial, they would make it a point to pay a visit to the grave the next morning. On their return they would volunteer information to whoever they met on the way:

"We were at the grave."

"Must have found it robbed?"

"That is what the grave says."

"Well, to hell with him."

Every inhabitant of Zajipather became familiar with these four sentences. It had become as essential a part of the funeral rituals as the last bath, the prayers for the dead and the burial.

One day suddenly, a cry went round the whole of Zajipather: the shroud robber had been found! This news was not of little sensational value in a habitation of five thousand souls.

The shroud robber was identified as Gana Baba. But from then onwards he came to be known as Gana the Spectre. The rush of people to Surapore, his *mohalla*, was such that it wore the festive look of a shrine on the saint's feast day. Everyone pressed forward to have a look at Gana the Spectre's face.

If he himself had not set it down in his will, no one would have ever come to know that he was the devil. In his dying declaration he had stated that he felt ashamed of his doings and expressed a wish that he be buried naked, shroud less—thus might he hope for mercy from God. But people did not execute this part of his will. So Gana the Spectre was buried properly and the people cursed him and despatched him to hell to their hearts' content.

But the next day when someone took a look at the grave by force of habit, he saw the body lying at the side of the grave, absolutely naked. The news spread like wildfire through the length and breadth of Zajipather. Once again, crowds flocked to the graveyard at Surapore. Some people thought that the Recording Angels, who make everyone render an account of their deeds in life, had dragged him out by his feet and flung him out of the grave. But finally the consensus was that some rascal, sore with his deeds, had taken revenge in this manner. The fact was that this act did not please the gentle-hearted people of Zajipather.

When they decided to place Gana the Spectre back in his grave just as he was found, an old man objected, "He will have to be given a fresh bath and the funeral conducted all over again—prayers and all."

"Why didn't you agree to a similar procedure in the case of Saladed's son?" another old man reminded him of the event that had taken place twenty years back.

"But he was not lying naked *outside* the grave, was he?" the first man clarified the point. "He was very much *inside* the grave. There is a world of difference between the two cases."

No one could deny the weight of this argument and, as a result, Gana the Spectre was lowered back to his grave only after being given a fresh bath, wrapped in a new shroud and accompanied by a funeral oration all over again.

But the next morning, he was found lying outside the grave, once again, stark naked. That day, in two or three other graveyards too, a couple of bodies buried a day earlier, were found lying outside their graves stripped bare just like Gana the Spectre's was. The people realised that it could not be the deed of a mere revenge seeker—obviously a new menace had been let loose upon them which was bent upon exposing the nakedness of their dead. Every inhabitant of Zajipather shuddered with horror. They expressed their feelings thus: "It will be hard to find another Gana the Spectre. Agreed that he took away the shrouds of the dead but he certainly did not expose them in their nakedness. This new devil is worse than an animal."

They say that from then onwards, the people of Zajipather sent their blessings upon Gana the Spectre and wished him the bliss of heaven while the new menace was consigned to the flames of hell in their collective wishes.

The Void

Ali Mohammad Lone

A vacuum, endless and ever-widening. It does not lie far in space; it was born in my mind and heart and formed itself into a bottomless pit within me.

This meaningless cycle—day turning into night, dawn, daylight, evening and then the darkness again!

All right then, the day is over. O.K., the night ends, but how does it matter to me? I just cannot apprehend any of this.

No, I am not drawn inwards, I am no introvert. But my friends are always complaining. I admit I cannot talk the way they do—I cannot interact. But introvert? Certainly not. It makes me laugh. Well, not quite laugh, but it does make my lips twist somewhat. But I remain silent. When one does not know how to talk at all, the only thing to do is to keep one's mouth shut.

My relatives describe me as one who answers only once in reply to a hundred questions. The elders put it down to wisdom. The youngsters call it arrogance. My less well-read friends' comment is, "When you reach the heights of intellect, there is hardly any need to communicate!" My only reaction to all these remarks is a vague smile—no, I do not want to mock them—it is just that I myself cannot explain my silence. As for the vacuum—what can I do about it? It keeps growing day by day—rippling out in ever-widening circles to the extent that the whole universe appears like an atom within it, even smaller. But who can explain this? What can be done about it?

Perhaps your existence has meaning for you. But what use am I? Why do I exist? Or perhaps I should ask, why do I *not* exist?

Thousands of books, hundreds of philosophies—I have read them all—but nothing can answer my question. How I have pored over every religious text, examined every point of view, but my question still waits for an answer. I reach no conclusion at all. That is why my existence appears pointless, lifeless to me. Even an automaton or robot exists for some reason. It is put together to serve some purpose and it does fulfil that purpose. But what of me? Who am I? A robot or a human being? This is something I have never understood.

There are chains that bind people—work, business, family, social obligations. Bound in these shackles they plod on regardless, their ears and minds shut. And they do reach their destinations somehow, like the beasts of burden that they are. But why am I different? I too am caught like a prisoner in these chains. Why do I then feel free? Is it possible to stay alive without any ties, friendless and alone?

Going to the office in the morning, returning in the evening, having dinner, listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, keeping an account of daily expenses, paying the insurance premium, provident fund, income-tax, house rent, births and deaths, marriages, mourning—yes, I am a part of all this but still I feel free, alone, unshackled. I worry about it. Without even believing in Him, sometimes the cry escapes me, "Oh my God!"

Recently I fell victim to an accident, was thrown off my bicycle in the dark. Then also I cried out, "Oh my God!" But when people helped me up, I felt nothing—no fear, no anxiety, nor even a sense of adventure. When they stood me before the X-ray machine, the doctor straightened my injured arm. It was then that I screamed out in pain—physical pain. Perspiration broke out all over my body. I don't know what the doctor saw. His hand trembled and he seemed worried as he said, "Perhaps there is a fracture." I was amused at the doctor's anxiety and laughed, which surprised him. When I was laid on the table under the X-ray machine, my arm was straightened again. The doctor spoke, hesitantly, "I think there is a fracture."

"Is that all?" and again I laughed loudly.

The doctor was angered by this and burst out, "You think it is a joke? It will take at least three months for these bones to heal."

"Only three months? Tut, tut . . ." I don't know why I felt somewhat let down. The doctor touched my brow and said, "I wonder if there is a head injury."

I kept my mouth shut. How could I tell the fool that a head which cannot think can never be hurt? How could it?

When the X-ray results came in. I was disappointed—there was nothing wrong with the arm, all the bones were intact. The doctor was very pleased. "You are very lucky, sir," he said.

The one opportunity of breaking out of the daily routine, had been lost. Just my luck! I could have tucked my arm in plaster, laid down on the clean, white sheets of the hospital bed—but none of these joys for me. And the silly doctor was saying, "Really, you are very lucky. I congratulate you on a miraculous escape!" Escape indeed! The idiot!

Other people feel the need for things, material things. Their whole life is spent in acquiring them. But I do not hanker after any object. All my needs are internal. I lack feeling. I feel nothing—no fear, no joy, no grief, no love, no hatred.

Some intellectuals say that man lives by bread alone. Rice and *hak*, plus air and water—just these are enough to keep the body alive. But till recently I believed that there was something else too, other needs which require a different kind of food. That is why I read books, wrote stories, acted in plays, listened to music, watched films, went to the club, attended soirées, was sociable, entertained and was entertained. But all that is in the past. It is different now. I find it all silly, useless, disgusting. My brain has been drained out with all this reading. Writing stories has only tied my own life in knots. And acting? It is nothing but imitation, with no use for intelligence. As for music, it only serves to alienate one from reality. Films too have no purpose. All my former occupations—going to the club, meeting friends, seem a mere formality now.

Why is it so? What do I want? I don't know. I want nothing—nothing at all. But the vacuum in my heart and mind is eating me up. How I wish it could be filled up. What does it need? Somebody's love? Affection? Sympathy? But I do have these. What can I do if the hole remains gaping? I do not even get fed up! That at least would have been a feeling—something to fill the void. God! Is there no way at all?

It must be raining—the air is cool and has a bracing nip. What a luxury it is to cuddle up in a white quilt! But it is only for those who await the night and then the dawn. But what of him, whom fate denies this wait? Where can he go?

The Cattle Pound

Amin Kamil

My acquaintance with Dinanath goes back a long time. My father and he shared a very close relationship with each other. And what closeness it was—the two of them would seem to draw their heads from the same shirt as you might say.

As long as my father was alive, Dinanath used to come and see him regularly, once or twice a week, even though he might have been posted at a police station miles away. The relationship with my father is no more—but for me, he still has special affection. He does not hide anything relating to the affairs of the police station from me, even though they are supposed to be absolutely confidential. The question of keeping minor secrets does not arise.

The other day I went to see him about a personal matter.

A few days prior to this, the town had witnessed disturbances on a political issue. A group of people had defied Section 144 and gathered in a market place, holding a demonstration against the Government. While talking to Dinanath, I casually mentioned that no doubt it was his duty to arrest those who were demonstrating, but what kind of blind justice was it to enter people's homes and pull out the innocent and lock them up? I told him that there were a dozen people or so whom I knew personally and who would never willingly participate in events like these. What did he hope to gain by the unrestrained, mindless exercise of authority?

Listening to my observation Dinanath grinned, took out a cigarette case from his pocket, offered me a cigarette and, taking one for himself, said: "So you want an answer to your question? Very well. You shall have it. Listen."

The explanation that Dinanath gave me reminded me of an old story—at least twenty-six years old. Those were the days when Kashmir was under the monarchical rule of Maharaja Hari Singh.

The story goes thus:

One fine morning at about 10 a.m., I was on my way to the college when I saw some policemen pulling and dragging about half a dozen reluctant cows by a rope. At the policemen's heels was a group of women and children, beating their breasts. One of the policemen was telling the women, "Either you do not understand us or perhaps you cannot see straight." "Please, sir, we beg you with our hands folded," the women were trying to soften their hearts, "for God's sake, let these cows go. May all your ills fall on us!"

"What sins are we paying for!" another policeman swore angrily. "Perhaps you do not believe that we will give you the ten annas." He addressed another policeman, "Come on, give the money into their hands. Perhaps that will set their hearts at rest." The policeman offered them the money but the women refused to accept it. They pleaded and begged for the cows to be set free. It was a piteous sight. I was confounded. If the police were rounding up stray cows and taking them to the cattle pond, as the law prescribed, what was this little drama between the two parties in aid of? And why was the policeman offering them money? I went a little closer to the group and asked, "Could you please tell me what the issue is? Where are you taking these cows?"

"There is no issue at all," one of the policemen answered my query, "we have to put these cows in the cattle pound. We are explaining to these women that as soon as they are formally admitted into the pound, they are free to take them away. The only catch is that they will have to pay a fine of ten annas—and that amount we are ready to give them, here and now. It is an absolutely straight matter but these simpletons refuse to understand. Why don't *you* explain it to them? Here, you see the ten annas? Take it and give it to them on our behalf, please."

I did not accept the money, nor did I undertake to explain the matter to the women because I myself could not understand it. Some third person's cows were being put into the pound and the police were paying the fine from their own pockets! Why? Why should they bother? If it was the poverty of the women that moved them, why didn't they let the cows go?

I approached the policemen once again, "Of course you are right. But why are you paying the fine for them?"

"Ah, what can I tell you," one of them made a sorrowful face, "you see, the Maharaja Saheb arrived from Delhi yesterday. The road from the airport to the royal palace at Gupkar had been closed to all traffic at that time, as you know is always done when the Maharaja Saheb has to go anywhere. You know very well that not even a fly dares to be seen on that road till well after the Maharaja Saheb's convoy passes. Yesterday too there was a huge police presence on both sides of the road to ensure this. But as our ill luck would have it, just when Maharaja Saheb's cavalcade was passing by the Silk Factory, a couple of godforsaken cows, for no reason whatsoever, emerged from an alley, running wildly and without as much as a by-your-leave, proceeded to cross the road. The policemen struggled desperately but their efforts were in vain. And the unimaginable happened—the Maharaja Saheb's car had to stop till the cows yielded the way. Orders were issued then and there, by the Maharaja Saheb to the D.I.G. Police that all the policemen on duty on that stretch of road should be suspended immediately. Going a step further, the D.I.G. instructed that whenever a stray cow was seen it should be sent to the pound forthwith and that any policeman not taking his job seriously would be suspended. We have our families to worry about—we cannot play with our livelihood. We too have to prove our devotion to duty. But as ill luck would have it, we were unable to find a stray cow anywhere. There was nothing for it but to drive these cows from their shed and send them to the pound. These women would have to pay a fine of ten annas but we were prepared to compensate. Why should they object to this?"

I was provoked to laugh on that occasion too, just as I was the other day when Dinanath gave me a similar explanation.

The Burnt-out Sun

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Anees Hamadani

From the distance came the sound of a siren. I don't know whether anyone else heard it or not but I heard it—not just heard the sound but recognised it too. It was the ambulance siren and its call was for me. That is why I came out. Excuses or arguments would serve no purpose. The matter had been settled at the top: I was sick and needed treatment.

Within a few moments it drove up to where I was standing. Two men got out. They did not speak to me at all but I read the message very well from their faces. That is why I walked towards the ambulance fast. I entered it and the two followed me inside. One of them closed the door. The driver, between whose black teeth glittered a white cigarette, glanced at me. Something stuck in my throat and I could not swallow.

The wheels spun on the cold surface of the road. I don't know whether anyone else was aware of it or not but the wheels kept on whirring. I could not understand anything of what was happening. Neither did the men say a word. And I did not dare ask. When my glance fell on them accidentally it seemed that I had been watching them for ages. Sometimes they appeared to be deep in thought.

When the ambulance came to a halt they took my arms and led me to where they wanted. I found myself in a dark cell, where there was just one bed and on it lay God knows what. Spread on it I saw a blanket, red as though saturated with blood. That is why the things on the bed could not be discerned. And there were the stark, high, white-washed walls of the cell. I could not understand why they were painted white—perhaps to bring some light, I thought. But then where was the light? Here there was nothing but darkness. Why were the walls white? I thought I would enquire, but from whom? There was no one, but even if there had been, how could I ask? Then there came a sound—drip-drip-drip. This did something to me. My innards quivered under its shrill, piercing jabs. How long would it go on? And I in this room, in this situation? Nothing made sense. Was it sunny outside or was it raining? Where was the drip-drip-drip coming from? I wished I could dismantle the walls, and see what was happening outside. How long had I been inside? I knew nothing. I had been leading a quiet, harmless enough life. Why then did they put me in a strait-jacket? And why did they change my environment? Has sickness ever been cured by a mere change of place?

I have been here now for a long, long time. Sometimes I feel as if I have just arrived here. It is hard to keep count of the years.

What happened ultimately was something I had never imagined. Actually I have always been waiting for something that never happens. Through the wall the two of them came—the same wall through which they had forcibly pushed me in earlier—and advanced towards me. They said nothing. One of them removed the red blanket from the bed. Spread underneath was a white sheet. I cast one look at the white sheet and another at the white of the walls and then lifted my eyes to their faces. The same thought occurred to me once again: why did the walls have such white faces? To tell the truth, I did not have the courage to ask them. Perhaps they were cleverer than I was and that was how they read the unframed question on my face and one of them spoke, "One must get acquainted with death before it comes. That is the reason why these walls are painted stark white." They took charge of me and laid me down on the white sheet, face upwards, brought some instruments and cut my face into two. They left one half linked to my skeletal form and severed the other. One of the two brought a cloth and, wrapping the severed half of my face in it, put it in some safe place beyond my gaze. I could understand nothing of it at all. All was deathly still. They said nothing, nor did I venture to speak. Then they picked me up and put a chain around my neck. I looked down and felt a locket that was suspended from it. There was a number engraved on it. I tried very hard to read the number but could not. The fact was that my eyes had gone with the part of my face which had been removed so how could I read anything? Then they took me out of the room the same way as I had been brought in, through the wall. As we came out, one of the two said, "Go, you are free now. You will never see an ambulance again, nor will you ever be brought here."

Anguish

◆

Avtar Krishna 'Rehbar'

He was serious as always, but sad, somewhat lost.

He cast one look at the river and another at the lowest steps of the *ghat*. The water of the River Veth (Vitasta, Jhelum) seemed to drag itself along. It had neither the blue colour nor the flow which he had seen in it so often at one time—particularly in those days of his childhood and youth, when, in the company of his friends and mates, he used to swim and paddle across it on his way to school or college. The dance of the running water would move him to ecstasy. But today there was neither the dance nor the fast-paced flow.

This water was his great weakness. As a student of the Mission School, he had participated in several swimming events. He used to splash about and swim down from Amira Kadal to the weir, and also across the Wular Lake, an achievement for which he had won a medal. He used to treat the *ghat* near his home as his own backyard and would sit on its grey stone steps for hours together, sunning his bare body. Then he would dive deep, disappearing under water, holding his breath, and only rise much later near the struts of the Fateh Kadal Bridge. The housewives and young girls of the neighbourhood, who used to come to the *ghat* to wash their clothes, would stare fascinated at his dare-devil acts of disappearance and emergence in the Veth, their eyes searching for him all the time till he rose for air. And only then would they begin beating their clothes with their flat clubs in a continuous, rhythmic motion. He remembered it all and lit another cigarette, while his eyes again caressed the lower steps where the women used to sit while washing the clothes. These were the steps which had made him lose his head and heart suddenly one day. But he had never found that image again. Numerous scenes from his life rose before his eyes. He turned them over in his mind before blowing them away into the wind, with the clouds of smoke from his cigarette. "What ways Time devises to weave its fabric!" he wondered, "how helpless man is, caught in the grip of events and accidents—utterly powerless and miserable." He went on reflecting, without drawing conclusions. His thoughts had travelled a long way on the stream of his consciousness—look, where they had carried him!

After the partition of the Indian subcontinent, Kashmir was plunged in turmoil and he became a victim of terrible events. His father had been posted in Muzaffarabad. He himself lived with an uncle. He had done the B.Sc. final examination, and was awaiting the return of his parents so that he could plan his future. But neither his mother nor father ever returned. Nothing could be retrieved from the ashes of the past—there was no word about their fate. A lot of stories were in circulation but God alone knew what the truth was. Anxious, helpless and jobless, he fled from Kashmir to Bombay. From there he went on to Goa, which was a Portuguese colony at the time. He then proceeded to Lisbon and onwards to America. All this was a long story which only a Sarshar could turn into a *Fasan-i-Azad.* But the story would be incomplete as long as the character of Professor Bernard was not introduced in it.

Professor Bernard was an Indologist. Not only was he very well acquainted with every part of the Indian subcontinent but he had a special affection and interest in the country—whether it was Kashmir or the Dravidian land, Harappa or Mohenjodaro, Bengal or the Punjab. Whenever he saw him, he would be prompted to say, "Oh beautiful man from a beautiful land . . . the land of seers and saints!" Professor Bernard played a very important role in helping him rise in his career. Triloki Nath was Professor T. Nath now, his name included in the list of renowned professors of eminence. He had acquired American citizenship. Living in New York for a long time now, he had found everything—name, honour, wealth, fame—all the things which a man desires.

But at the same time, it could not be denied that in spite of the numerous comforts and luxuries of life that he enjoyed, a strange thirst, an emptiness filled him. The memory of the River Veth and its waters—Kashmir—its sights and sounds—his school—his neighbourhood—his own *ghat*—Kashmiri songs—icicles hanging from the roofs in winter. The memories would fill his heart with a mad longing. And it was this longing which had made him return to Kashmir a number of times.

On this trip, he had stayed for a month or so and now he was ready to return to America. There was no one left of his family—not even his uncle or his children. The old house had been bought by a milkman of the same neighbourhood who had raised him like his own son in those days long ago. Whenever he returned, he would make it a point to visit his old home, go round the neighbourhood, its streets and alleys, and spend a couple of hours at the *ghat*, bathe in the river, relive old memories. He would chat with Samad Joo the milkman for hours together and he loved every moment of it. Samad Joo's heart would swell with pride when he saw him, as if he was celebrating the return of his own son. Whenever he arrived and stood before him, Samad Joo would leap up, "Oh, it is Treya, Poshmali's Triloki. When did you come, my boy? How is the *memsahib*? And the children? May the Prophet keep you all safe from the evil eye!" He would get news of all the people he knew. He found Professor Bernard and Samad Joo strangely alike. Both were affectionate, pleasant, sweet old men—open and frank. A unique radiance glowed in their white beards.

This time he had returned to Kashmir after a gap of several years. A lighted cigarette gripped in his fingers, his eyes were on the Veth. The waters of the river were sluggish, almost suspended. Where was the old spirit and sparkle, that gaiety and bustle? The sight of the unsightly, filthy *ghats* put him off and he was filled with aversion. He felt like an outsider. Many of his friends and well-wishers were dead, among them Samad Joo too. The new faces around were strangers to him, devoid of feeling. With this realisation, a feeling of alienation grew in him till he felt as if he was dead too, his body a corpse. "A lot of wealth has come to Kashmir," he thought. "Pray God make the people even more rich—but people's hearts have grown cold, frigid. Fanaticism and greed have raised their heads." The inner revulsion increased even more when he saw his bride-like Veth degenerated into a stinking swamp. He recalled the words with which Professor Bernard would often introduce him:

"You haven't met him before? He is the one who comes from that beautiful place known as Kashmir, where profound spiritual knowledge was nourished in the lap of *rishis* and *sufis*. In every Kashmiri, there is a bit of the spiritual attainment of the Mahatmas of old, and if he puts it to a creative use in the slightest way, he will be able to work miracles. This is Nath, yes, Nath, not Nat, which is a wrong pronunciation of his name. 'Nath' means Lord as in Shiva Nath—Lord Siva. T. Nath is Triloki Nath, rather Trilok Nath, Lord of the Three Worlds. Veth, i.e. Jhelum, and Sindh are two famous holy rivers of India and whosoever has the good fortune of taking a dip in them, not only has all the sins of all his *janams*, i.e. incarnations, washed away, but he is also liberated from the otherwise endless cycle of birth and death once for all. And it is Kashmir where the Jhelum, known as Veth, takes birth, finds flow and grows into the river that it is." Professor Bernard would so weave his research into the discourse that the listeners were held spellbound. Every nerve in Triloki Nath's body would tingle with joy listening to this angel sent down by God to bestow greatness upon him and the land of his birth. He recalled all that now and the memory of it heightened his anguish. He thought that he should get up, clench his fists and run away and never come back again. But no . . . no . . . he must have one dip in it—no, no—this is not that Veth . . . this is a swamp . . . no . . . no, but . . . Professor Bernard's words kept ringing in his ears—"Shiva Nath is Lord Siva—Triloki Nath is Lord of the Three Worlds." He thrust his fingers in his ears but nothing could stop the resonance of the words. He was maddened and began to talk to himself . . . . "Lord Siva drank up all the venom and became eternal. The others drank the nectar but still could not find immortality! And, what of Triloki Nath—the Lord of the Three Worlds? What a great name I have! Full of meaning and grandeur, but how small, petty and ordinary I am! I . . . I can't bathe in this toxic, polluted river." He felt himself grow smaller and pettier. He would go down the steps—he would—he would suck up all the toxins, pollutants of the river—yes—yes. He took off his clothes and before entering the water, raised both hands to the heavens and pleaded, "Oh my Lord God, shield me from shame and disgrace. If I am unable to drink up all this filth, do not let me rise out of this Veth." Saying this, he dived into the river, holding his breath. But today there was no one to watch or be concerned about who went into the river or where he would rise from the waters.

Notes on the Authors

Amin Kamil (1974 . . . .)

A major writer in Kashmiri, his published work includes collection of short stories, *Kathi Manz Kath*, the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning *Lava tu Prava*, a novel, *Gati Manz Gash* and a collection of poems, *Beyi Suy Paan*. His poetry and short stories have also been published in the *Sheeraza*, the journal of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, as well as the *Journal of Indian Literature*, (Sahitya Akademi).

Ali Mohammad Lone (1926-1987)

Ali Mohammad Lone worked for Radio Kashmir and the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, and wrote a number of plays, a novel, *Asiti Chhi Insaan* and short stories. Most of his plays have been broadcast on radio.

Akhtar Mohi-ud-din (1928 . . . .)

Akhtar Mohi-ud-din has made a significant contribution to the enrichment of modern Kashmiri literature. His published work includes a novel, *Dode tu Dag*, two collections of short stories, *Swanzal* and *Sath Sangar*, the latter winning the Sahitya Akademi Award. A number of his stories and critical pieces have appeared in the *Journal of Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi) and *Sheeraza* (Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages).

Ghulam Rasool Santosh (1929 . . . .)

Ghulam Rasool Santosh, celebrated painter and poet, has won awards in a number of national and international art exhibitions. Two poetry collections, *Shakti Vichar* and *Vakh* have established him as a writer of original talent in Kashmiri. His short stories have been published in the journals, *Sheeraza* and *Vaad*. He is a recipient of the Padma Shri award and has also been honoured by a number of national and regional cultural organisations.

Bansi 'Nirdosh' (1928 . . . .)

Bansi 'Nirdosh' was associated with Radio Kashmir as a producer and author of a number of popular plays. *Bal Marayo*, *Adam Chhu Vithay Budnaam*, and *Girdab* are his published collections of short stories. He has also written a novel titled *Akh Daur*.

Avatar Krishna 'Rehbar' (1933 . . . .)

Avatar Krishna 'Rehbar' worked for Radio Kashmir as a producer. A significant contribution to Kashmiri literature is his history of Kashmiri literature titled *Kashri Adabuk Tawarikh*. Other published works include a collection of short stories entitled *Tabarruq*.

Hari Krishan Koul (1934 . . . .)

Hari Krishan Koul has taught at the Kashmir University. He writes fiction, mainly short stories and plays in Kashmiri and Hindi. His published work includes the collections of short stories, *Pata Laran Parbat*, *Halas Chhu Rotul*, 'in Kashmiri and *Arthi* and *Tokri Bhar Dhoop* in Hindi. A number of his plays have been broadcast on Radio Kashmir as well as telecast on Srinagar Doordarshan.

Hirday Koul Bharati (1936 . . . .)

Contemporary writer and thinker, Hirday Koul Bharati has written a number of plays and short stories. *Tsakravyuh*, his published collection of short stories, established his reputation as a serious chronicler of human dilemmas and sensibilities. He was awarded the Akashwani (A.I.R.) national prize for a Radio play. His critical writings have been published in the *Sheeraza* and *Sone Adab* (Cultural Academy, Srinagar)

Rattan Lal Shant (1938 . . . .)

Rattan Lal Shant teaches Hindi at the Kashmir University. He has written short stories in Hindi and Kashmiri. His published works in Kashmiri include a collection of short stories, *Achharvalan Peth Koh.* His work has also been published in the *Sheeraza* and *Sone Adab* (Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages) and various journals of the Sahitya Akademi.

Abdul Gani Beg Athar (1943 . . . .)

Abdul Gani Athar is a teacher in the Jammu and Kashmir Education Department. He has written poetry, short stories and plays in Kashmiri. The collection of his short stories has been published. His work has also appeared in *Sheeraza* (Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages).

Nazir Jehangir (1948 . . . .)

Nazir Jehangir works for the Jammu and Kashmir Horticulture Department. He writes in Kashmiri as well as Urdu. He has written a number of short stories, plays and popular tele-serials which have established him as a humorist.

Anees Hamadani (1955-1989)

A writer of great promise, Anees Hamadani's career came to a tragic end when he was hit by a bullet in 1989. He worked as an Agricultural Scientist before joining Radio Kashmir, Srinagar as an editor. He wrote a number of plays and short stories. One of his plays was also performed in a National Theatre Workshop. His stories were posthumously published in a collection titled *Vujood Tu Thsayi.*

Nayeema Ahmad (1955 . . . .)

She gained popularity as part of the cast of the serial *Zoonadab* which, broadcast from Radio Kashmir, Srinagar, had not only a great fan following but also won Padma Shris for the leading members of its cast. She belongs to a crop of young writers in Kashmir. She has now joined the B.B.C. Urdu Service as a broadcaster.

Neerja Mattoo (1937 . . . .)

Neerja Mattoo is Professor and Head of Department of English, Government College for Women. Her published work includes a book *Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh—The Trefoil Land* (Spantech Publishers). Professor Mattoo was awarded a British Council Visitorship to the Universities of Oxford and London in 1984. Her translations from Kashmiri into English have appeared in a number of literary journals as well as the publications of the Sahitya Akademi on contemporary Indian literature.

Glossary

annas	a coin no longer in use, an anna used to be one-sixteenth of a rupee.
Article 370	an Article in the Indian Constitution which guarantees a special status to Jammu and Kashmir State.
Babu	a white-collar worker, but in Kashmiri it is an ironical term for a pretentious person.
brother-in-law	a swearword in Kashmiri.
chir	an evergreen coniferous tree, a type of pine.
chulha	an earthen stove in which firewood is used as fuel.
haak	a popular Kashmiri green vegetable, its leaves are cooked.
halwai	a sweetmeat seller.
Ji	a suffix to a name to show respect or affection.
kangri	a small basket-like contraption woven around an earthen bowl, in which charcoal smoulders to give warmth. It can be carried around, sometimes under the folds of a garment.
lathicharge	a baton charge made by the police to control demonstrations by people.
Maulvi	a Muslim religious teacher, a scholar of Arabic or Persian.

Panwallah	:	a betel-leaf seller; more like a corner·tobacconist.
Pass	:	a term used by schoolchildren to seek permission to go to the lavatory.
Pheran	:	a long-sleeved loose garment, usually made of woollen fabric worn by Kashmiri men and women.
Saheb	:	a term of respect used for men.
samadhi	:	a trancelike meditative state in Yoga.
Section 144	:	a Section of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibits the gathering of more than specified number of people at one place.
Seth	:	a wealthy man or successful businessman.
Shivaratri	:	a Hindu festival celebrating the marriage of Lord Shiva to Parvati. It is the most important festival for Kashmiri Pandits, marked by feasts and entertainment. Walnuts soaked in water for a number of days are distributed at the end of the religious ceremonies.
shraddha	:	rituals performed by Hindus on death anniversaries of parents.
Veth	:	Kashmiri name of the river Jhelum.

G.M.C.E.J
2738

Kashmiri is one of the oldest living languages of India. Unfortunately, few non-Kashmiris understand it and therefore its literature, rich in content and form, has remained largely unknown to the world outside Kashmir.

Translated into English for the first time, this collection of stories is an attempt to introduce major Kashmiri writers to a wider readership. The stories offered here reflect the Kashmiri consciousness and, at the same time, have an appeal that extends far beyond geographical and linguistic boundaries. In some of them, human nature has been portrayed through surprisingly ordinary situations. In "The Boy is Guilty", for instance, we see the bizarre effect that the fainting of a boy in a bus has on his fellow passengers. In the title story, "The Stranger Beside Me", the writer borrows the motif of 'identity' from a Kashmiri myth and, imbuing it with a dark symbolism, develops a link between strangers caught in the crush of a faceless crowd. "The Grave Robber", on the other hand, is a traditional, simply-told story about the horror that invades the lives of the inhabitants of Zajipather. In "The Enemy" and in "Anguish" the themes relate to the harsh contemporary realities of Kashmir and, in "The Second Meeting", to the death of love through unrelenting time.

These and other stories in this anthology are a window to Kashmir's creative talent and a major contribution to Indian writing through translation.

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